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Fantasy & Science Fiction

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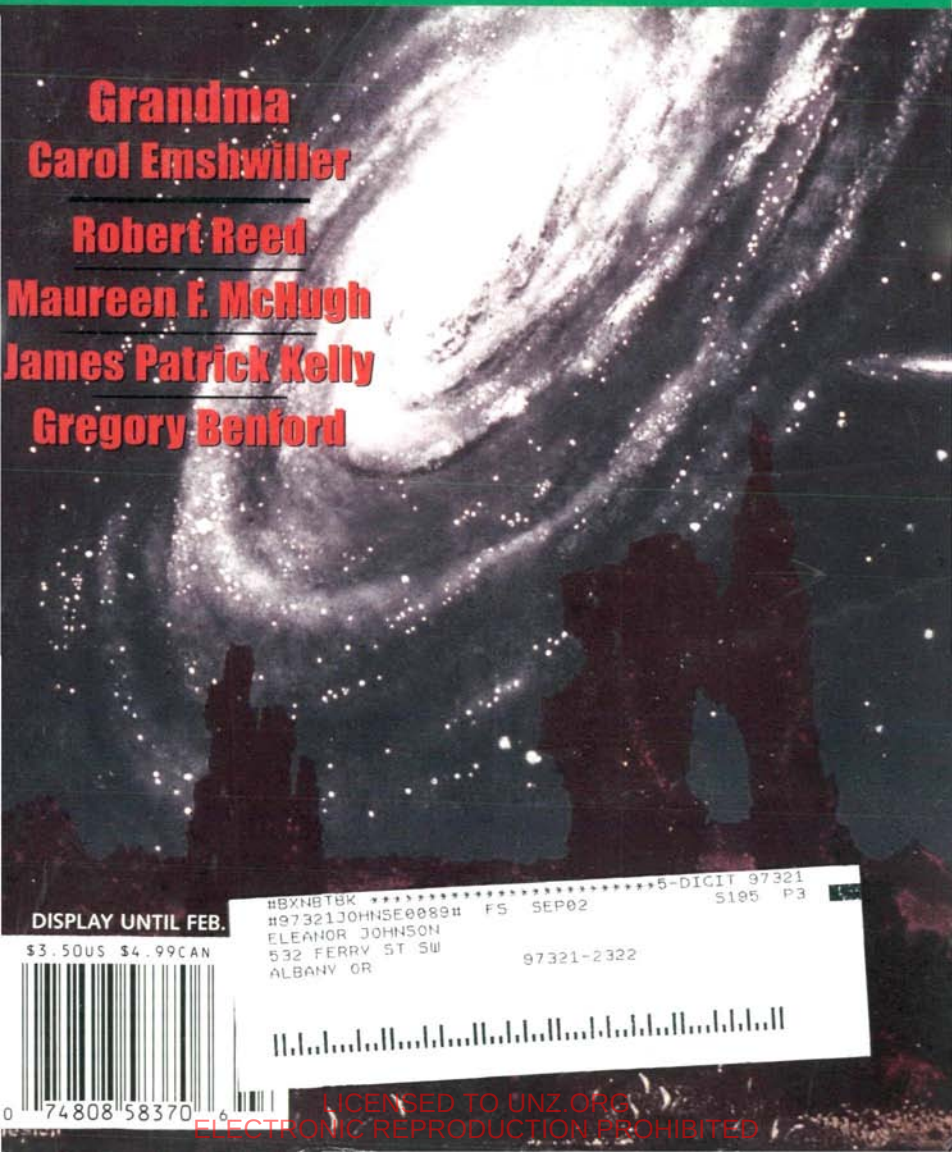

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FROM THE HUGO AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

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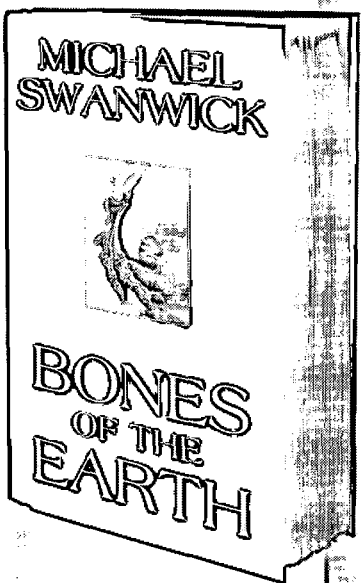
BONES OF THE EARTH



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THE MAGAZINE OF
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The subject matter of Robert Reed's stories varies very widely. In the past couple of years we've seen him address ghosts, collectibles, time travel, werewolves, and sailing as it relates to the nature of the physical world. His last story in these pages was "Raven's Dream." His new one returns to address one subject that fascinates Mr. Reed: humanity. Its makeup, its flaws, its potential, its myriad possibilities seem to beguile him, as you'll see from this new venture.

Coelacanths

By Robert Reed

The Speaker

HE STALKS THE WIDE STAGE, a brilliant beam of hot blue light fixed squarely upon him. "We are great! We are glorious!" the man calls out. His voice is pleasantly, effortlessly loud. With a face handsome to the brink of lovely and a collage of smooth, passionate mannerisms, he performs for an audience that sits in the surrounding darkness. Flinging long arms overhead, hands reaching for the distant light, his booming voice proclaims, "We have never been as numerous as we are today. We have never been this happy. And we have never known the prosperity that is ours at this golden moment. This golden now!" Athletic legs carry him across the stage, bare feet slapping against planks of waxed maple. "Our species is thriving," he can declare with a seamless ease. "By every conceivable measure, we are a magnificent, irresistible tide sweeping across the universe!"

Transfixed by the blue beam, his naked body is shamelessly young,

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rippling with hard muscles over hard bone. A long fat penis dangles and dances, accenting every sweeping gesture, every bold word. The living image of a small but potent god, he surely is a creature worthy of admiration, a soul deserving every esteem and emulation. With a laugh, he promises the darkness, "We have never been so powerful, we humans." Yet in the next breath, with a faintly apologetic smile, he must add, "Yet still, as surely as tomorrow comes, our glories today will seem small and quaint in the future, and what looks golden now will turn to the yellow dust upon which our magnificent children will tread!"

Procyon

Study your history. It tells you that travel always brings its share of hazards; that's a basic, impatient law of the universe. Leaving the security and familiarity of home is never easy. But every person needs to make the occasional journey, embracing the risks to improve his station, his worth and self-esteem. Procyon explains why this day is a good day to wander. She refers to intelligence reports as well as the astrological tables. Then by a dozen means, she maps out their intricate course, describing what she hopes to find and everything that she wants to avoid.

She has twin sons. They were born four months ago, and they are mostly grown now. "Keep alert," she tells the man-children, leading them out through a series of reinforced and powerfully camouflaged doorways. "No naps, no distractions," she warns them. Then with a backward glance, she asks again, "What do we want?"

"Whatever we can use," the boys reply in a sloppy chorus.

"Quiet," she warns. Then she nods and shows a caring smile, reminding them, "A lot of things can be used. But their trash is sweetest."

Mother and sons look alike: They are short, strong people with closely cropped hair and white-gray eyes. They wear simple clothes and three fashions of camouflage, plus a stew of mental add-ons and microchine helpers as well as an array of sensors that never blink, watching what human eyes cannot see. Standing motionless, they vanish into the convoluted, ever-shifting background. But walking makes them into three transient blurs — dancing wisps that are noticeably simpler than the enormous world around them. They can creep ahead only so far before their camouflage

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falls apart, and then they have to stop, waiting patiently or otherwise, allowing the machinery to find new ways to help make them invisible.

"I'm confused," one son admits. "That thing up ahead — "

"Did you update your perception menu?"

"I thought I did."

Procyon makes no sound. Her diamond-bright glare is enough. She remains rigidly, effortlessly still, allowing her lazy son to finish his preparations. Dense, heavily encoded signals have to be whispered, the local net downloading the most recent topological cues, teaching a three-dimensional creature how to navigate through this shifting, highly intricate environment.

The universe is fat with dimensions.

Procyon knows as much theory as anyone. Yet despite a long life rich with experience, she has to fight to decipher what her eyes and sensors tell her. She doesn't even bother learning the tricks that coax these extra dimensions out of hiding. Let her add-ons guide her. That's all a person can do, slipping in close to one of *them*. In this place, up is three things and sideways is five others. Why bother counting? What matters is that when they walk again, the three of them move through the best combination of dimensions, passing into a little bubble of old-fashioned up and down. She knows this place. Rising up beside them is a trusted landmark — a red granite bowl that cradles what looks like a forest of tall sticks, the sticks leaking a warm light that Procyon ignores, stepping again, moving along on her tiptoes.

One son leads the way. He lacks the experience to be first, but in another few weeks, his flesh and sprint-grown brain will force him into the world alone. He needs his practice, and more important, he needs confidence, learning to trust his add-ons and his careful preparations, and his breeding, and his own good luck.

Procyon's other son lingers near the granite bowl. He's the son who didn't update his menu. This is her dreamy child, whom she loves dearly. Of course she adores him. But there's no escaping the fact that he is easily distracted, and that his adult life will be, at its very best, difficult. Study your biology. Since life began, mothers have made hard decisions about their children, and they have made the deadliest decisions with the tiniest of gestures.

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Procyon lets her lazy son fall behind.

Her other son takes two careful steps and stops abruptly, standing before what looks like a great black cylinder set on its side. The shape is a fiction: The cylinder is round in one fashion but incomprehensible in many others. Her add-ons and sensors have built this very simple geometry to represent something far more elaborate. This is a standard disposal unit. Various openings appear as a single slot near the rim of the cylinder, just enough room showing for a hand and forearm to reach through, touching whatever garbage waits inside.

Her son's thick body has more grace than any dancer of old, more strength than a platoon of ancient athletes. His IQ is enormous. His reaction times have been enhanced by every available means. His father was a great old soul who survived into his tenth year, which is almost forever. But when the boy drifts sideways, he betrays his inexperience. His sensors attack the cylinder by every means, telling him that it's a low-grade trash receptacle secured by what looks like a standard locking device, AI-managed and obsolete for days, if not weeks. And inside the receptacle is a mangled piece of hardware worth a near-fortune on the open market.

The boy drifts sideways, and he glimmers.

Procyon says, "No," too loudly.

But he feels excited, invulnerable. Grinning over his shoulder now, he winks and lifts one hand with a smooth, blurring motion —

Instincts old as blood come bubbling up. Procyon leaps, shoving her son off his feet and saving him. And in the next horrible instant, she feels herself engulfed, a dry cold hand grabbing her, then stuffing her inside a hole that by any geometry feels nothing but bottomless.

Able

Near the lip of the City, inside the emerald green ring of Park, waits a secret place where the moss and horsetail and tree fern forest plunges into a deep crystalline pool of warm spring water. No public map tells of the pool, and no trail leads the casual walker near it. But the pool is exactly the sort of place that young boys always discover, and it is exactly the kind of treasure that remains unmentioned to parents or any other adult with suspicious or troublesome natures.

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Able Quotient likes to believe that he was first to stumble across this tiny corner of Creation. And if he isn't first, at least no one before him has ever truly seen the water's beauty, and nobody after him will appreciate the charms of this elegant, timeless place.

Sometimes Able brings others to the pool, but only his best friends and a few boys whom he wants to impress. Not for a long time does he even consider bringing a girl, and then it takes forever to find a worthy candidate, then muster the courage to ask her to join him. Her name is Mish. She's younger than Able by a little ways, but like all girls, she acts older and much wiser than he will ever be. They have been classmates from the beginning. They live three floors apart in The Tower Of Gracious Good, which makes them close neighbors. Mish is pretty, and her beauty is the sort that will only grow as she becomes a woman. Her face is narrow and serious. Her eyes watch everything. She wears flowing dresses and jeweled sandals, and she goes everywhere with a clouded leopard named Mr. Stuff-and-Nonsense. "If my cat can come along," she says after hearing Able's generous offer. "Are there any birds at this pond of yours?"

Able should be horrified by the question. The life around the pool knows him and has grown to trust him. But he is so enamored by Mish that he blurts out, "Yes, hundreds of birds. Fat, slow birds. Mr. Stuff can eat himself sick."

"But that wouldn't be right," Mish replies with a disapproving smirk. "I'll lock down his appetite. And if we see any wounded birds...any animal that's suffering...we can unlock him right away...!"

"Oh, sure," Able replies, almost sick with nerves. "I guess that's fine, too."

People rarely travel any distance. City is thoroughly modern, every apartment supplied by conduits and meshed with every web and channel, shareline and gossip run. But even with most of its citizens happily sitting at home, the streets are jammed with millions of walking bodies. Every seat on the train is filled all the way to the last stop. Able momentarily loses track of Mish when the cabin walls evaporate. But thankfully, he finds her waiting at Park's edge. She and her little leopard are standing in the narrow shade of a horsetail. She teases him, observing, "You look lost." Then she laughs, perhaps at him, before abruptly changing the

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subject. With a nod and sweeping gesture, she asks, "Have you noticed? Our towers look like these trees."

To a point, yes. The towers are tall and thin and rounded like the horsetails, and the hanging porches make them appear rough-skinned. But there are obvious and important differences between trees and towers, and if she were a boy, Able would make fun of her now. Fighting his nature, Able forces himself to smile. "Oh, my," he says as he turns, looking back over a shoulder. "They do look like horsetails, don't they?"

Now the three adventurers set off into the forest. Able takes the lead. Walking with boys is a quick business that often turns into a race. But girls are different, particularly when their fat, unhungry cats are dragging along behind them. It takes forever to reach the rim of the world. Then it takes another two forevers to follow the rim to where they can almost see the secret pool. But that's where Mish announces, "I'm tired!" To the world, she says, "I want to stop and eat. I want to rest here."

Able nearly tells her, "No."

Instead he decides to coax her, promising, "It's just a little farther."

But she doesn't seem to hear him, leaping up on the pink polished rim, sitting where the granite is smooth and flat, legs dangling and her bony knees exposed. She opens the little pack that has floated on her back from the beginning, pulling out a hot lunch that she keeps and a cold lunch that she hands to Able. "This is all I could take," she explains, "without my parents asking questions." She is reminding Able that she never quite got permission to make this little journey. "If you don't like the cold lunch," she promises, "then we can trade. I mean, if you really don't."

He says, "I like it fine," without opening the insulated box. Then he looks inside, discovering a single wedge of spiced sap, and it takes all of his poise not to say, "Ugh!"

Mr. Stuff collapses into a puddle of towerlight, instantly falling asleep.

The two children eat quietly and slowly. Mish makes the occasional noise about favorite teachers and mutual friends. She acts serious and ordinary, and disappointment starts gnawing at Able. He isn't old enough to sense that the girl is nervous. He can't imagine that Mish wants to delay the moment when they'll reach the secret pool, or that she sees possibilities waiting there — wicked possibilities that only a wicked boy should be able to foresee.

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Finished with her meal, Mish runs her hands along the hem of her dress, and she kicks at the air, and then, hunting for any distraction, she happens to glance over her shoulder.

Where the granite ends, the world ends. Normally nothing of substance can be seen out past the pink stone — nothing but a confused, ever-shifting grayness that extends on forever. Able hasn't bothered to look out there. He is much too busy trying to finish his awful meal, concentrating on his little frustrations and his depraved little daydreams.

"Oh, goodness," the young girl exclaims. "Look at that!"

Able has no expectations. What could possibly be worth the trouble of turning around? But it's an excuse to give up on his lunch, and after setting it aside, he turns slowly, eyes jumping wide open and a surprised grunt leaking out of him as he tumbles off the granite, landing squarely on top of poor Mr. Stuff.

Escher

She has a clear, persistent memory of flesh, but the flesh isn't hers. Like manners and like knowledge, what a person remembers can be bequeathed by her ancestors. That's what is happening now. Limbs and heads; penises and vaginas. In the midst of some unrelated business, she remembers having feet and the endless need to protect those feet with sandals or boots or ostrich skin or spiked shoes that will lend a person even more height. She remembers wearing clothes that gave color and bulk to what was already bright and enormous. At this particular instant, what she sees is a distant, long-dead relative sitting on a white porcelain bowl, bare feet dangling, his orifices voiding mountains of waste and an ocean of water.

Her oldest ancestors were giants. They were built from skin and muscle, wet air and great slabs of fat. Without question, they were an astonishing excess of matter, vast beyond all reason, yet fueled by slow, inefficient chemical fires.

Nothing about Escher is inefficient. No flesh clings to her. Not a drop of water or one glistening pearl of fat. It's always smart to be built from structure light and tested, efficient instructions. It's best to be tinier than a single cell and as swift as electricity, slipping unseen through places that won't even notice your presence.

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Escher is a glimmer, a perfect and enduring whisper of light. Of life. Lovely in her own fashion, yet fierce beyond all measure.

She needs her fierceness.

When cooperation fails, as it always does, a person has to throw her rage at the world and her countless enemies.

But in this place, for this moment, cooperation holds sway.

Manners rule.

Escher is eating. Even as tiny and efficient as she is, she needs an occasional sip of raw power. Everyone does. And it seems as if half of everyone has gathered around what can only be described as a tiny, delicious wound. She can't count the citizens gathered at the feast. Millions and millions, surely. All those weak glimmers join into a soft glow. Everyone is bathed in a joyous light. It is a boastful, wasteful show, but Escher won't waste her energy with warnings. Better to sip at the wound, absorbing the free current, building up her reserves for the next breeding cycle. It is best to let others make the mistakes for you: Escher believes nothing else quite so fervently.

A pair of sisters float past. The familial resemblance is obvious, and so are the tiny differences. Mutations as well as tailored changes have created two loud gossips who speak and giggle in a rush of words and raw data, exchanging secrets about the multitude around them.

Escher ignores their prattle, gulping down the last of what she can possibly hold, and then pausing, considering where she might hide a few nanojoules of extra juice, keeping them safe for some desperate occasion.

Escher begins to hunt for that unlikely hiding place.

And then her sisters abruptly change topics. Gossip turns to trading memories stolen from The World. Most of it is picoweight stuff, useless and boring. An astonishing fraction of His thoughts are banal. Like the giants of old, He can afford to be sloppy. To be a spendthrift. Here is a pointed example of why Escher is happy to be herself. She is smart in her own fashion, and imaginative, and almost everything about her is important, and when a problem confronts her, she can cut through the muddle, seeing the blessing wrapped up snug inside the measurable risks.

Quietly, with a puzzled tone, one sister announces, "The World is alarmed."

"About?" says the other.

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"A situation," says the first. "Yes, He is alarmed now. Moral questions are begging for His attention."

"What questions?"

The first sister tells a brief, strange story.

"You know all this?" asks another. Asks Escher. "Is this daydream or hard fact?"

"I know, and it is fact." The sister feels insulted by the doubting tone, but she puts on a mannerly voice, explaining the history of this sudden crisis.

Escher listens.

And suddenly the multitude is talking about nothing else. What is happening has never happened before, not in this fashion...not in any genuine memory of any of the millions here, it hasn't...and some very dim possibilities begin to show themselves. Benefits wrapped inside some awful dangers. And one or two of these benefits wink at Escher, and smile....

The multitude panics, and evaporates.

Escher remains behind, deliberating on these possibilities. The landscape beneath her is far more sophisticated than flesh, and stronger, but it has an ugly appearance that reminds her of a flesh-born memory. A lesion; a pimple. A tiny, unsightly ruin standing in what is normally seamless, and beautiful, and perfect.

She flees, but only so far.

Then she hunkers down and waits, knowing that eventually, in one fashion or another, He will scratch at this tiny irritation.

The Speaker

"You cannot count human accomplishments," he boasts to his audience, strutting and wagging his way to the edge of the stage. Bare toes curl over the sharp edge, and he grins jauntily, admitting, "And I cannot count them, either. There are simply too many successes, in too many far flung places, to nail up a number that you can believe. But allow me, if you will, this chance to list a few important marvels."

Long hands grab bony hips, and he gazes out into the watching darkness. "The conquest of our cradle continent," he begins, "which was quickly followed by the conquest of our cradle world. Then after a

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gathering pause, we swiftly and thoroughly occupied most of our neighboring worlds, too. It was during those millennia when we learned how to split flint and atoms and DNA and our own restless psyches. With these apish hands, we fashioned great machines that worked for us as our willing, eager slaves. And with our slaves' more delicate hands, we fabricated machines that could think for us." A knowing wink, a mischievous shrug. "Like any child, of course, our thinking machines eventually learned to think for themselves. Which was a dangerous, foolish business, said some. Said fools. But my list of our marvels only begins with that business. This is what I believe, and I challenge anyone to say otherwise."

There is a sound — a stern little murmur — and perhaps it implies dissent. Or perhaps the speaker made the noise himself, fostering a tension that he is building with his words and body.

His penis grows erect, drawing the eye.

Then with a wide and bright and unabashedly smug grin, he roars out, "Say this with me. Tell me what great things we have done. Boast to Creation about the wonders that we have taken part in...!"

Procyon

Torture is what this is: She feels her body plunging from a high place, head before feet. A frantic wind roars past. Outstretched hands refuse to slow her fall. Then Procyon makes herself spin, putting her feet beneath her body, and gravity instantly reverses itself. She screams, and screams, and the distant walls reflect her terror, needles jabbed into her wounded ears. Finally, she grows quiet, wrapping her arms around her eyes and ears, forcing herself to do nothing, hanging limp in space while her body falls in one awful direction.

A voice whimpers.

A son's worried voice says, "Mother, are you there? Mother?"

Some of her add-ons have been peeled away, but not all of them. The brave son uses a whisper-channel, saying, "I'm sorry," with a genuine anguish. He sounds sick and sorry, and exceptionally angry, too. "I was careless," he admits. He says, "Thank you for saving me." Then to someone else, he says, "She can't hear me."

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"I hear you," she whispers.

"Listen," says her other son. The lazy one. "Did you hear something?"

She starts to say, "Boys," with a stern voice. But then the trap vibrates, a piercing white screech nearly deafening Procyon. Someone physically strikes the trap. Two someones. She feels the walls turning around her, the trap making perhaps a quarter-turn toward home.

Again, she calls out, "Boys."

They stop rolling her. Did they hear her? No, they found a hidden restraint, the trap secured at one or two or ten ends.

One last time, she says, "Boys."

"I hear her," her dreamy son blurts.

"Don't give up, Mother," says her brave son. "We'll get you out. I see the locks, I can beat them — "

"You can't," she promises.

He pretends not to have heard her. A shaped explosive detonates, making a cold ringing sound, faraway and useless. Then the boy growls, "Damn," and kicks the trap, accomplishing nothing at all.

"It's too tough," says her dreamy son. "We're not doing any good — "

"Shut up," his brother shouts.

Procyon tells them, "Quiet now. Be quiet."

The trap is probably tied to an alarm. Time is short, or it has run out already. Either way, there's a decision to be made, and the decision has a single, inescapable answer. With a careful and firm voice, she tells her sons, "Leave me. Now. Go!"

"I won't," the brave son declares. "Never!"

"Now," she says.

"It's my fault," says the dreamy son. "I should have been keeping up — "

"Both of you are to blame," Procyon calls out. "And I am, too. And there's bad luck here, but there's some good, too. You're still free. You can still get away. Now, before you get yourself seen and caught — "

"You're going to die," the brave son complains.

"One day or the next, I will," she agrees. "Absolutely."

"We'll find help," he promises.

"From where?" she asks.

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"From who?" says her dreamy son in the same instant. "We aren't close to anyone — "

"Shut up," his brother snaps. "Just shut up!"

"Run away," their mother repeats.

"I won't," the brave son tells her. Or himself. Then with a serious, tight little voice, he says, "I can fight. We'll both fight."

Her dreamy son says nothing.

Procyon peels her arms away from her face, opening her eyes, focusing on the blurring cylindrical walls of the trap. It seems that she was wrong about her sons. The brave one is just a fool, and the dreamy one has the good sense. She listens to her dreamy son saying nothing, and then the other boy says, "Of course you're going to fight. Together, we can do some real damage — "

"I love you both," she declares.

That wins a silence.

Then again, one last time, she says, "Run."

"I'm not a coward," one son growls.

While her good son says nothing, running now, and he needs his breath for things more essential than pride and bluster.

Able

The face stares at them for the longest while. It is a great wide face, heavily bearded with smoke-colored eyes and a long nose perched above the cavernous mouth that hangs open, revealing teeth and things more amazing than teeth. Set between the bone-white enamel are little machines made of fancy stuff. Able can only guess what the add-on machines are doing. This is a wild man, powerful and free. People like him are scarce and strange, their bodies reengineered in countless ways. Like his eyes: Able stares into those giant gray eyes, noticing fleets of tiny machines floating on the tears. Those machines are probably delicate sensors. Then with a jolt of amazement, he realizes that those machines and sparkling eyes are staring into their world with what seems to be a genuine fascination.

"He's watching us," Able mutters.

"No, he isn't," Mish argues. "He can't see into our realm."

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"We can't see into his either," the boy replies. "But just the same, I can make him out just fine."

"It must be...." Her voice falls silent while she accesses City's library. Then with a dismissive shrug of her shoulders, she announces, "We're caught in his topological hardware. That's all. He has to simplify his surroundings to navigate, and we just happen to be close enough and aligned right."

Able had already assumed all that.

Mish starts to speak again, probably wanting to add to her explanation. She can sure be a know-everything sort of girl. But then the great face abruptly turns away, and they watch the man run away from their world.

"I told you," Mish sings out. "He couldn't see us."

"I think he could have," Able replies, his voice finding a distinct sharpness.

The girl straightens her back. "You're wrong," she says with an obstinate tone. Then she turns away from the edge of the world, announcing, "I'm ready to go on now."

"I'm not," says Able.

She doesn't look back at him. She seems to be talking to her leopard, asking, "Why aren't you ready?"

"I see two of them now," Able tells her.

"You can't."

"I can." The hardware trickery is keeping the outside realms sensible. A tunnel of simple space leads to two men standing beside an iron-black cylinder. The men wear camouflage, but they are moving too fast to let it work. They look small now. Distant, or tiny. Once you leave the world, size and distance are impossible to measure. How many times have teachers told him that? Able watches the tiny men kicking at the cylinder. They beat on its heavy sides with their fists and forearms, managing to roll it for almost a quarter turn. Then one of the men pulls a fist-sized device from what looks like a cloth sack, fixing it to what looks like a sealed slot, and both men hurry to the far end of the cylinder.

"What are they doing?" asks Mish with a grumpy interest.

A feeling warns Able, but too late. He starts to say, "Look away — "

The explosion is brilliant and swift, the blast reflected off the cylinder

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and up along the tunnel of ordinary space, a clap of thunder making the giant horsetails sway and nearly knocking the two of them onto the forest floor.

"They're criminals," Mish mutters with a nervous hatred.

"How do you know?" the boy asks.

"People like that just are," she remarks. "Living like they do. Alone like that, and wild. You know how they make their living."

"They take what they need — "

"They steal!" she interrupts.

Able doesn't even glance at her. He watches as the two men work frantically, trying to pry open the still-sealed doorway. He can't guess why they would want the doorway opened. Or rather, he can think of too many reasons. But when he looks at their anguished, helpless faces, he realizes that whatever is inside, it's driving these wild men very close to panic.

"Criminals," Mish repeats.

"I heard you," Able mutters.

Then before she can offer another hard opinion, he turns to her and admits, "I've always liked them. They live by their wits, and mostly alone, and they have all these sweeping powers — "

"Powers that they've stolen," she whines.

"From garbage, maybe." There is no point in mentioning whose garbage. He stares at Mish's face, pretty but twisted with fury, and something sad and inevitable occurs to Able. He shakes his head and sighs, telling her, "I don't like you very much."

Mish is taken by surprise. Probably no other boy has said those awful words to her, and she doesn't know how to react, except to sputter ugly little sounds as she turns, looking back over the edge of the world.

Able does the same.

One of the wild men abruptly turns and runs. In a supersonic flash, he races past the children, vanishing into the swirling grayness, leaving his companion to stand alone beside the mysterious black cylinder. Obviously weeping, the last man wipes the tears from his whiskered face with a trembling hand, while his other hand begins to yank a string of wondrous machines from what seems to be a bottomless sack of treasures.

* * *

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Escher

She consumes all of her carefully stockpiled energies, and for the first time in her life, she weaves a body for herself: A distinct physical shell composed of diamond dust and keratin and discarded rare earths and a dozen subtle glues meant to bind to every surface without being felt. To a busy eye, she is dust. She is insubstantial and useless and forgettable. To a careful eye and an inquisitive touch, she is the tiniest soul imaginable, frail beyond words, forever perched on the brink of extermination. Surely she poses no threat to any creature, least of all the great ones. Lying on the edge of the little wound, passive and vulnerable, she waits for Chance to carry her where she needs to be. Probably others are doing the same. Perhaps thousands of sisters and daughters are hiding nearby, each snug inside her own spore case. The temptation to whisper, "Hello," is easily ignored. The odds are awful as it is; any noise could turn this into a suicide. What matters is silence and watchfulness, thinking hard about the great goal while keeping ready for anything that might happen, as well as everything that will not.

The little wound begins to heal, causing a trickling pain to flow.

The World feels the irritation, and in reflex, touches His discomfort by several means, delicate and less so.

Escher misses her first opportunity. A great swift shape presses its way across her hiding place, but she activates her glues too late. Dabs of glue cure against air, wasted. So she cuts the glue loose and watches again. A second touch is unlikely, but it comes, and she manages to heave a sticky tendril into a likely crevice, letting the irresistible force yank her into a brilliant, endless sky.

She will probably die now.

For a little while, Escher allows herself to look back across her life, counting daughters and other successes, taking warm comfort in her many accomplishments.

Someone hangs in the distance, dangling from a similar tendril. Escher recognizes the shape and intricate glint of her neighbor's spore case; she is one of Escher's daughters. There is a strong temptation to signal her, trading information, helping each other —

But a purge-ball attacks suddenly, and the daughter evaporates,

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nothing remaining of her but ions and a flash of incoherent light.

Escher pulls herself toward the crevice, and hesitates. Her tendril is anchored on a fleshy surface. A minor neuron — a thread of warm optical cable — lies buried inside the wet cells. She launches a second tendril at her new target. By chance, the purge-ball sweeps the wrong terrain, giving her that little instant. The tendril makes a sloppy connection with the neuron. Without time to test its integrity, all she can do is shout, "Don't kill me! Or my daughters! Don't murder us, Great World!"

Nothing changes. The purge-ball works its way across the deeply folded fleshscape, moving toward Escher again, distant flashes announcing the deaths of another two daughters or sisters.

"Great World!" she cries out.

He will not reply. Escher is like the hum of a single angry electron, and she can only hope that he notices the hum.

"I am vile," she promises. "I am loathsome and sneaky, and you should hate me. What I am is an illness lurking inside you. A disease that steals exactly what I can steal without bringing your wrath."

The purge-ball appears, following a tall reddish ridge of flesh, bearing down on her hiding place.

She says, "Kill me, if you want. Or spare me, and I will do this for you." Then she unleashes a series of vivid images, precise and simple, meant to be compelling to any mind.

The purge-ball slows, its sterilizing lasers taking careful aim.

She repeats herself, knowing that thought travels only so quickly and The World is too vast to see her thoughts and react soon enough to save her. But if she can help...if she saves just a few hundred daughters...?

Lasers aim, and do nothing. Nothing. And after an instant of inactivity, the machine changes its shape and nature. It hovers above Escher, sending out its own tendrils. A careless strength yanks her free of her hiding place. Her tendrils and glues are ripped from her aching body. A scaffolding of carbon is built around her, and she is shoved inside the retooled purge-ball, held in a perfect darkness, waiting alone until an identical scaffold is stacked beside her.

A hard, angry voice boasts, "I did this."

"What did you do?" asks Escher.

"I made the World listen to reason." It sounds like Escher's voice,

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except for the delusions of power. "I made a promise, and that's why He saved us."

With a sarcastic tone, she says, "Thank you ever so much. But now where are we going?"

"I won't tell you," her fellow prisoner responds.

"Because you don't know where," says Escher.

"I know everything I need to know."

"Then you're the first person ever," she giggles, winning a brief, delicious silence from her companion.

Other prisoners arrive, each slammed into the empty spaces between their sisters and daughters. Eventually the purge-ball is a prison-ball, swollen to vast proportions, and no one else is being captured. Nothing changes for a long while. There is nothing to be done now but wait, speaking when the urge hits and listening to whichever voice sounds less than tedious.

Gossip is the common currency. People are desperate to hear the smallest glimmer of news. Where the final rumor comes from, nobody knows if it's true. But the woman who was captured moments after Escher claims, "It comes from the world Himself. He's going to put us where we can do the most good."

"Where?" Escher inquires.

"On a tooth," her companion says. "The right incisor, as it happens." Then with that boasting voice, she adds, "Which is exactly what I told Him to do. This is all because of me."

"What isn't?" Escher grumbles.

"Very little," the tiny prisoner promises. "Very, very little."

The Speaker

"We walk today on a thousand worlds, and I mean 'walk' in all manners of speaking." He manages a few comical steps before shifting into a graceful turn, arms held firmly around the wide waist of an invisible and equally graceful partner. "A hundred alien suns bake us with their perfect light. And between the suns, in the cold and dark, we survive, and thrive, by every worthy means."

Now he pauses, hands forgetting the unseen partner. A look of

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calculated confusion sweeps across his face. Fingers rise to his thick black hair, stabbing it and yanking backward, leaving furrows in the unruly mass.

"Our numbers," he says. "Our population. It made us sick with worry when we were ten billion standing on the surface of one enormous world. 'Where will our children stand?' we asked ourselves. But then in the next little while, we became ten trillion people, and we had split into a thousand species of humanity, and the new complaint was that we were still too scarce and spread too far apart. 'How could we matter to the universe?' we asked ourselves. 'How could so few souls endure another day in our immeasurable, uncaring universe?'"

His erect penis makes a little leap, a fat and vivid white drop of semen striking the wooden stage with an audible plop.

"Our numbers," he repeats. "Our legions." Then with a wide, garish smile, he confesses, "I don't know our numbers today. No authority does. You make estimates. You extrapolate off data that went stale long ago. You build a hundred models and fashion every kind of vast number. Ten raised to the twentieth power. The thirtieth power. Or more." He giggles and skips backward, and with the giddy, careless energy of a child, he dances where he stands, singing to lights overhead, "If you are as common as sand and as unique as snowflakes, how can you be anything but a wild, wonderful success?"

Able

The wild man is enormous and powerful, and surely brilliant beyond anything that Able can comprehend — as smart as City as a whole — but despite his gifts, the man is obviously terrified. That he can even manage to stand his ground astonishes Able. He says as much to Mish, and then he glances at her, adding, "He must be very devoted to whoever's inside."

"Whoever's inside what?" she asks.

"That trap." He looks straight ahead again, telling himself not to waste time with the girl. She is foolish and bad-tempered, and he couldn't be any more tired of her. "I think that's what the cylinder is," he whispers. "A trap of some kind. And someone's been caught in it."

"Well, I don't care who," she snarls.

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He pretends not to notice her.

"What was that?" she blurts. "Did you hear that — ?"

"No," Able blurts. But then he notices a distant rumble, deep and faintly rhythmic, and with every breath, growing. When he listens carefully, it resembles nothing normal. It isn't thunder, and it can't be a voice. He feels the sound as much as he hears it, as if some great mass were being displaced. But he knows better. In school, teachers like to explain what must be happening now, employing tortuous mathematics and magical sleights of hand. Matter and energy are being rapidly and brutally manipulated. The universe's obscure dimensions are being twisted like bands of warm rubber. Able knows all this. But still, he understands none of it. Words without comprehension; froth without substance. All that he knows for certain is that behind that deep, unknowable throbbing lies something even farther beyond human description.

The wild man looks up, gray eyes staring at that something.

He cries out, that tiny sound lost between his mouth and Able. Then he produces what seems to be a spear — no, an elaborate missile — that launches itself with a bolt of fire, lifting a sophisticated warhead up into a vague gray space that swallows the weapon without sound, or complaint.

Next the man aims a sturdy laser, and fires. But the weapon simply melts at its tip, collapsing into a smoldering, useless mass at his feet.

Again, the wild man cries out.

His language could be a million generations removed from City-speech, but Able hears the desperate, furious sound of his voice. He doesn't need words to know that the man is cursing. Then the swirling grayness slows itself, and parts, and stupidly, in reflex, Able turns to Mish, wanting to tell her, "Watch. You're going to see one of *Them*."

But Mish has vanished. Sometime in the last few moments, she jumped off the world's rim and ran away, and save for the fat old leopard sleeping between the horsetails, Able is entirely alone now.

"Good," he mutters.

Almost too late, he turns and runs to very edge of the granite rim.

The wild man stands motionless now. His bowels and bladder have emptied themselves. His handsome, godly face is twisted from every flavor of misery. Eyes as big as windows stare up into what only they can

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see, and to that great, unknowable something, the man says two simple words.

"Fuck you," Able hears.

And then the wild man opens his mouth, baring his white apish teeth, and just as Able wonders what's going to happen, the man's body explodes, the dull black burst of a shaped charge sending chunks of his face skyward.

Procyon

One last time, she whispers her son's name.

She whispers it and closes her mouth and listens to the brief, sharp silence that comes after the awful explosion. What must have happened, she tells herself, is that her boy found his good sense and fled. How can a mother think anything else? And then the ominous deep rumbling begins again, begins and gradually swells until the walls of the trap are shuddering and twisting again. But this time the monster is slower. It approaches the trap more cautiously, summoning new courage. She can nearly taste its courage now, and with her intuition, she senses emotions that might be curiosity and might be a kind of reflexive admiration. Or do those eternal human emotions have any relationship for what *It* feels...?

What she feels, after everything, is numbness. A terrible deep weariness hangs on her like a new skin. Procyon seems to be falling faster now, accelerating down through the bottomless trap. But she doesn't care anymore. In place of courage, she wields a muscular apathy. Death looms, but when hasn't it been her dearest companion? And in place of fear, she is astonished to discover an incurious little pride about what is about to happen: How many people — wild free people like herself — have ever found themselves so near one of *Them*?

Quietly, with a calm smooth and slow voice, Procyon says, "I feel you there, you. I can taste you."

Nothing changes.

Less quietly, she says, "Show yourself."

A wide parabolic floor appears, gleaming and black and agonizingly close. But just before she slams into the floor, a wrenching force peels it away. A brilliant violet light rises to meet her, turning into a thick sweet

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syrup. What may or may not be a hand curls around her body, and squeezes. Procyon fights every urge to struggle. She wrestles with her body, wrestles with her will, forcing both to lie still while the hand tightens its grip and grows comfortable. Then using a voice that betrays nothing tentative or small, she tells what holds her, "I made you, you know."

She says, "You can do what you want to me."

Then with a natural, deep joy, she cries out, "But you're an ungrateful glory...and you'll always belong to me...!"

Escher

The prison-ball has been reengineered, slathered with camouflage and armor and the best immune-suppressors on the market, and its navigation system has been adapted from add-ons stolen from the finest trashcans. Now it is a battle-phage riding on the sharp incisor as far as it dares, then leaping free. A thousand similar phages leap and lose their way, or they are killed. Only Escher's phage reaches the target, impacting on what passes for flesh and launching its cargo with a microscopic railgun, punching her and a thousand sisters and daughters through immeasurable distances of senseless, twisted nothing.

How many survive the attack?

She can't guess how many. Can't even care. What matters is to make herself survive inside this strange new world. An enormous world, yes. Escher feels a vastness that reaches out across ten or twelve or maybe a thousand dimensions. How do I know where to go? she asks herself. And instantly, an assortment of possible routes appear in her consciousness, drawn in the simplest imaginable fashion, waiting and eager to help her find her way around.

This is a last gift from Him, she realizes. Unless there are more gifts waiting, of course.

She thanks nobody.

On the equivalent of tiptoes, Escher creeps her way into a tiny conduit that moves something stranger than any blood across five dimensions. She becomes passive, aiming for invisibility. She drifts and spins, watching her surroundings turn from a senseless glow into a landscape that

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occasionally seems a little bit reasonable. A little bit real. Slowly, she learns how to see in this new world. Eventually she spies a little peak that may or may not be ordinary matter. The peak is pink and flexible and sticks out into the great artery, and flinging her last tendril, Escher grabs hold and pulls in snug, knowing that the chances are lousy that she will ever find anything nourishing here, much less delicious.

But her reserves have been filled again, she notes. If she is careful — and when hasn't she been — her energies will keep her alive for centuries.

She thinks of the World, and thanks nobody.

"Watch and learn," she whispers to herself.

That was the first human thought. She remembers that odd fact suddenly. People were just a bunch of grubbing apes moving blindly through their tiny lives until one said to a companion, "Watch and learn."

An inherited memory, or another gift from Him?

Silently, she thanks Luck, and she thanks Him, and once again, she thanks Luck.

"Patience and planning," she tells herself.

Which is another wise thought of the conscious, enduring ape.

The Last Son

The locked gates and various doorways know him — recognize him at a glance — but they have to taste him anyway. They have to test him. Three people were expected, and he can't explain in words what has happened. He just says, "The others will be coming later," and leaves that lie hanging in the air. Then as he passes through the final doorway, he says, "Let no one through. Not without my permission first."

"This is your mother's house," says the door's AI.

"Not anymore," he remarks.

The machine grows quiet, and sad.

During any other age, his home would be a mansion. There are endless rooms, rooms beyond counting, and each is enormous and richly furnished and lovely and jammed full of games and art and distractions and flourishes that even the least aesthetic soul would find lovely. He sees none of that now. Alone, he walks to what has always been his room, and he sits on a leather recliner, and the house brings him a soothing drink and

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an intoxicating drink and an assortment of treats that sit on the platter, untouched.

For a long while, the boy stares off at the distant ceiling, replaying everything with his near-perfect memory. Everything. Then he forgets everything, stupidly calling out, "Mother," with a voice that sounds ridiculously young. Then again, he calls, "Mother." And he starts to rise from his chair, starts to ask the great empty house, "Where is she?"

And he remembers.

As if his legs have been sawed off, he collapses. His chair twists itself to catch him, and an army of AIs brings their talents to bear. They are loyal, limited machines. They are empathetic, and on occasion, even sweet. They want to help him in any fashion, just name the way...but their appeals and their smart suggestions are just so much noise. The boy acts deaf, and he obviously can't see anything with his fists jabbed into his eyes like that, slouched forward in his favorite chair, begging an invisible someone for forgiveness....

The Speaker

He squats and uses the tip of a forefinger to dab at the puddle of semen, and he rubs the finger against his thumb, saying, "Think of cells. Individual, self-reliant cells. For most of Earth's great history, they ruled. First as bacteria, and then as composites built from cooperative bacteria. They were everywhere and ruled everything, and then the wild cells learned how to dance together, in one enormous body, and the living world was transformed for the next seven hundred million years."

Thumb and finger wipe themselves dry against a hairy thigh, and he rises again, grinning in that relentless and smug, yet somehow charming fashion. "Everything was changed, and nothing had changed," he says. Then he says, "Scaling," with an important tone, as if that single word should erase all confusion. "The bacteria and green algae and the carnivorous amoebae weren't swept away by any revolution. Honestly, I doubt if their numbers fell appreciably or for long." And again, he says, "Scaling," and sighs with a rich appreciation. "Life evolves. Adapts. Spreads and grows, constantly utilizing new energies and novel genetics. But wherever something large can live, a thousand small things can

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thrive just as well, or better. Wherever something enormous survives, a trillion bacteria hang on for the ride."

For a moment, the speaker hesitates.

A slippery half-instant passes where an audience might believe that he has finally lost his concentration, that he is about to stumble over his own tongue. But then he licks at the air, tasting something delicious. And three times, he clicks his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

Then he says what he has planned to say from the beginning.

"I never know whom I'm speaking to," he admits. "I've never actually seen my audience. But I know you're great and good. I know that however you appear, and however you make your living, you deserve to hear this:

"Humans have always lived in terror. Rainstorms and the eclipsing moon and earthquakes and the ominous guts of some disemboweled goat — all have preyed upon our fears and defeated our fragile optimisms. But what we fear today — what shapes and reshapes the universe around us — is a child of our own imaginations.

"A whirlwind that owes its very existence to glorious, endless us!"

Able

The boy stops walking once or twice, letting the fat leopard keep pace. Then he pushes his way through a last wall of emerald ferns, stepping out into the bright damp air above the rounded pool. A splashing takes him by surprise. He looks down at his secret pool, and he squints, watching what seems to be a woman pulling her way through the clear water with thick, strong arms. She is naked. Astonishingly, wonderfully naked. A stubby hand grabs an overhanging limb, and she stands on the rocky shore, moving as if exhausted, picking her way up the slippery slope until she finds an open patch of halfway flattened earth where she can collapse, rolling onto her back, her smooth flesh glistening and her hard breasts shining up at Able, making him sick with joy.

Then she starts to cry, quietly, with a deep sadness.

Lust vanishes, replaced by simple embarrassment. Able flinches and starts to step back, and that's when he first looks at her face.

He recognizes its features.

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Intrigued, the boy picks his way down to the shoreline, practically standing beside the crying woman.

She looks at him, and she sniffs.

"I saw two of them," he reports. "And I saw you, too. You were inside that cylinder, weren't you?"

She watches him, saying nothing.

"I saw something pull you out of that trap. And then I couldn't see you. *It* must have put you here, I guess. Out of its way." Able nods, and smiles. He can't help but stare at her breasts, but at least he keeps his eyes halfway closed, pretending to look out over the water instead. "*It* took pity on you, I guess."

A good-sized fish breaks on the water.

The woman seems to watch the creature as it swims past, big blue scales catching the light, heavy fins lazily shoving their way through the warm water. The fish eyes are huge and black, and they are stupid eyes. The mind behind them sees nothing but vague shapes and sudden motions. Able knows from experience: If he stands quite still, the creature will come close enough to touch.

"They're called coelacanths," he explains.

Maybe the woman reacts to his voice. Some sound other than crying now leaks from her.

So Able continues, explaining, "They were rare, once. I've studied them quite a bit. They're old and primitive, and they were almost extinct when we found them. But when *they* got loose, got free, and took apart the Earth...and took everything and everyone with them up into the sky..."

The woman gazes up at the towering horsetails.

Able stares at her legs and what lies between them.

"Anyway," he mutters, "there's more coelacanths now than ever. They live in a million oceans, and they've never been more successful, really." He hesitates, and then adds, "Kind of like us, I think. Like people. You know?"

The woman turns, staring at him with gray-white eyes. And with a quiet hard voice, she says, "No."

She says, "That's an idiot's opinion."

And then with a grace that belies her strong frame, she dives back into the water, kicking hard and chasing that ancient and stupid fish all the way back to the bottom.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Book of Counted Sorrows, by Dean Koontz, Barnes & Noble Digital, 2001, $4.95.

The Paper Doorway, by Dean Koontz, HarperCollins, 2001, $17.95.

FOR SOME time now, readers of Dean Koontz's books have noted the poems used as epigraphs in his various novels and gone looking for the book from which they were taken. But *The Books of Counted Sorrows* never existed (at least until now). Koontz wrote the poems because he couldn't find appropriate verses to quote, citing the mysterious *Counted Sorrows* because... well, that's what writers like to do. We make things up.

So for all those readers who've been trying to track it down, here it finally is, complete with Koontz's 22,000-word humorous introduction. Koontz has a delightful, whimsical, gruesome, and yes, corny, sense of humor. If you appreciate such, the introduction's worth the price of admission all on its own.

At one time a project such as this could only have come from the specialty press as some sort of a chapbook (and this particular one still might), but it would have been a limited edition, more expensive than the $4.95 being charged here, and would have quickly become a collectible, with the usual jacked-up prices collectibles acquire.

So I think it's a good thing to have it available in an e-book format. Along with keeping our field's backlist "in print" and offering a forum for new voices or difficult works that aren't feasible for large publishers to offer in a paper edition, this new e-book format complements traditional publishing well with exactly this sort of project.

The only downside is that you need a computer to read it. But as I've mentioned before in this column,

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many public libraries, schools, and cafés offer the use of computers for free, or for a nominal charge, so no one is really being cut out of the loop here.

But before the folks at Barnes & Noble Digital start patting themselves on the back for a job well done, I should note a couple of limitations:

First, the book can only be read with an Adobe Acrobat Reader or a Microsoft Reader, and only, at least in my experience, on a desktop PC. You can't transfer the book to read with the MS Reader available for handheld devices. Considering how many millions of handheld devices there are in use at the moment, you would think that they would have made it available in a format that can be read on Palms, Visors, and the various Pocket PC devices. Not many people like to sit in front of a desktop computer screen to read a book.

Second, the downloading of the book was a nightmare. It took me a week of returning to the site before I was finally able to get my copy.

So...a good idea, but a flawed execution. For Koontz completists only.

And speaking of Koontz completists and poetry, if you're one of the former and enjoy the latter, you'll probably want to check out his new collection *The Paper Doorway*, which consists solely of, as the subtitle informs us, "Funny Verse and Nothing Worse."

To be honest, it's pretty much doggerel (and I mean that in the sense that Webster's defines as "comic or burlesque, and usu. loose or irregular in measure"), but it's aimed at young readers, who will no doubt get quite a kick out of it, as well as the young at heart. I know more than a few of the poems got a chuckle from me — the ones that didn't get a groan.

The interior illustrations provided by Phil Parks are charming and suitable, while his cover sports what looks like an Americanized Harry Potter stepping into a book.

I don't say that to make a snide comment on Parks's originality. It's just an observation. I actually like the cover a lot, both its design and execution, and after all, the Harry Potter depicted on the book covers (and now in the movie as well) bears an uncanny resemblance to Neil Gaiman's character Timothy Hunter from *The Books of Magic*, which saw the light of day long before Rowling's series came upon the scene.

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Night in the Lonesome October, by Richard Laymon, CD Publications, 2001, $40.

In the Dark, by Richard Laymon, Leisure, 2001, $5.99.

Back in the late eighties, I wrote a column called "Behind the Darkness" for *Horrorstruck* magazine. The columns were profiles of writers working in the field, combined with a look at their books, so to prepare for each interview, I'd read the author's entire body of work that was available at the time. The third column was devoted to the late Richard Laymon, an incredibly cheerful and kind-hearted man who seemed entirely at odds with the grim books that appeared under his byline.

I was saddened to hear of his death in 2001. I also realized that it had been some time since I'd read any of his work. So when a number of his more recent books showed up in my P.O. box later in the year (my thanks to Bill Schafer and this magazine's editor, Gordon, for those), I plunged back into Laymon's shadowy world of words for a return visit.

What always appealed to me in Laymon's work was how he would take these ordinary people and put them into situations that were only slightly odd. At that point the protagonist could easily walk away. They don't, of course (or we'd have no story), but it's fascinating to see them making the choice to have a closer look at what, on the surface, appears relatively innocent, if askew from how the world normally works. And to wonder at what point we would turn away, if we were put in a similar situation.

His books often start quietly, building slowly until you get about halfway through and you realize that you can't stop reading. The innocence turns dark, and darker. Grim. Often gory. But you *have* to find out how it's going to end.

If that sounds like a formula, I don't mean it to. While you will find this structural set-up in most of Laymon's novels, the characters and situations vary so wildly from book to book that it's impossible to guess where the story will go.

In *Night in the Lonesome October*, we meet college student Ed Logan, who goes walking late at night to try to get over a broken heart. Out on the night streets, he discovers a whole strata of lives that have no connection to daylight. I don't mean night workers, here — those whose jobs take them out into the darkness. I mean strange

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folk. An old woman trying to run you down with her bicycle. Cannibals living under bridges like trolls. A young woman who makes a habit of entering peoples' homes and sometimes develops long-term relationships with those she finds inside.

And then there's the game of Ride or Hide. When you see car lights coming, or someone else on the street...do you make yourself scarce, or do you brave it out?

In *In the Dark*, librarian Jane Kerry finds an envelope with her name on it lying on the circulation desk. Inside is a fifty-dollar bill and a riddle that she realizes points to another envelope. She finds this one and in it is a hundred-dollar bill and another riddle. Subsequent letters keep doubling the money, but solving the riddles, and then undertaking the tasks they present, escalates accordingly in danger to one's self and to others.

At what point would you or I stop?

Probably long before Laymon's protagonists. But through his books we get to see what happens when you don't, when you allow yourself to be pulled into the darkness — eventually going so far that you can no longer see the light that was once behind you.

These are engrossing novels, written in a plain, simple prose that, the further into the book one reads, prove to have surprising layers. They also build into *very* dark and, at times, gory books. So be warned, if you don't like that sort of thing.

But they're also fascinating maps into the human mind.

I, Paparazzi, by Pat McGreal, Stephen John Phillips & Steven Parke, Vertigo, 2001, $29.95.

I remember when I was a kid they used to have "photonovels": they were like comic books, except instead of having artwork in the various panels, they had photographs. The books were usually romance stories, sometimes mysteries, and you'd see them on all the newsstands.

I haven't seen one for many years, although I believe they're still popular in Europe. And I certainly never saw them as lavishly produced as *I, Paparazzi*, or as expensive. The ones I remember sold for something like a quarter or fifty cents each, but then everything's more expensive these days.

They were never something I was all that interested in, so I was a little leery picking this one up. And to tell you the truth, a quick flip through the pages didn't do a whole

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lot for me. Photonovels are like a movie — the casting has to be just right — but even then, it all seems stiff and contrived.

But then I started to read the story....

Basically, it's about a photojournalist who, through various circumstances, is forced to make his living as a paparazzi — one of those photographers you always see at media events, shoving their cameras into the faces of celebrities. This one's not particularly likable, but as the story progresses and we follow his descent into a nightmare, he becomes understandable, if not entirely sympathetic.

I'd tell you more, but the plot's based on conspiracies, secret (not altogether human) societies, and betrayals, and frankly I don't want to spoil it for you in case you should decide to give it a try. What I can tell you is that the writing's superb: it's told in the first person and the protagonist has a gritty, realistic voice, perfectly suited to his personality and the sort of story being told. The photographs are certainly much better than I remember from those old photonovels of my youth — crisper, great angles, and the layouts are particularly intriguing — but I have to admit that this still isn't a medium that I'd normally seek out.

That said, I still find myself recommending this particular book because the strength of the story far outweighs my prejudices to this medium.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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Musing on Books

Michelle West

The Monsters of Morley Manor, by Bruce Coville, Harcourt, 2001, $16.

Being Dead, by Vivian Vande Velde, Harcourt, 2001, $17.

The Wizard's Dilemma, by Diane Duane, Harcourt, 2001, $17.

The Last Hero, by Terry Pratchett, HarperCollins, 2001, $35.

I AM incapable of keeping track of Magazine time, which is the time it takes to get from the here and now of writing a column to the here and now of reading it. So at the moment, I am in October, and it's the October after September, the month in which the joint birthday of my father and his oldest son are forever going to be overshadowed by the events of September 11th. I have watched more television in the past month than in the previous three years combined; I read the papers as if the edited words of distant reporters convey some visceral truth. I read about the firefighters who ran *up* the stairs because it was their job. I read newsgroups, and listened to people that I have always thought of as level-headed use phrases like "Nuke Mecca." I spoke to people who live in the shadow of the altered skyline, and I heard the passing of something I don't want to name in the numb business of their words.

The air is cool; I am writing outside to the sound of passing cars and raccoons trying to open the trash cans. And, of course, I am thinking about death. Or grief. I am trying to digest the phrase "collateral damage" without being cut by its edges, and frankly, it's impossible. I'm thinking of the Marshall plan. Of speaking with my parents, in the heated way that only teenagers can, about Nagasaki and Hiroshima. I can still see my father's face, moments before he ended the conversation by leaving the room,

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as he said, "But it ended the war." He was afraid, I think, to stand out, to object, to speak for the people who had no choice — had never had any choice — about the course of the war that was to kill them.

And I am thinking about racial profiling. About Eleanor Roosevelt, who made herself such a target of anger by posing for pictures with Japanese Americans right after Pearl Harbor, in an attempt to make clear what democracy — her democracy — stood for. In the end, it didn't matter. Both of my parents lived in internment camps, and my father was orphaned in them. There are shadows here. I don't believe that history can't repeat itself.

The first several books I picked up for the column were not bad books. But I read the surface of words without penetrating them; the act of reading, which has been such a necessary part of my life, was beyond me for weeks.

So perhaps it's not surprising that I turned to the handful of novels at hand that were written for young adults. They remind me of what reading was when I had a much clearer idea of what the world was all about — or of what it should have been all about; they invite me to re-enter that world and that place, to set aside the more demanding rigor of the nuance of an older life, to exchange it for the magic of a moment that has nothing to do with the mundane responsibilities of balancing books, paying mortgages, worrying about wars that are built because of the subtleties of the mundane.

Bruce Coville's *The Monsters of Morley Manor* is billed as a "Madcap Adventure," and in this case, the book lives up to that billing. It's a middle-reader, aimed at readers ages eight to twelve. The frenetic everything-but-the-kitchen-sink story of Morley Manor — that abandoned old house at the end of the street that everyone has always been afraid of — unfolds through the eyes of Anthony and his sister Sarah. Anthony is in the sixth grade when the owner of the manor passes away, and as there is no next of kin, the contents of the house are being auctioned off.

Interesting things always come of big, cavernous, abandoned houses — so it's no surprise that Anthony's purchase — a cigar box of some sort — turns his life and his sister's upside-down. Because the box itself isn't empty, and when water is inadvertently added to the small figurines that occupy it, magic happens. They come to life.

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Gaspar, his werespaniel, and his two very strange sisters are in need of Anthony's help. In return for it, they tell him some part of the history of Morley Manor; it appears that the former owner was, in fact, Gaspar's twin brother, and he imprisoned them all in some arcane way fifty years ago. It seems that Gaspar and his brother Martin, exploring in the way that young boys often do, stumbled across Wentar, a man possessed of arcane knowledge that he was willing to share with the two in return for their aid.

That knowledge led both boys into strange new worlds, and one of those worlds seemed to have made a permanent — and unpleasant — change in Martin.

That would be bad enough, and certainly that would be enough for a single novel, but Coville doesn't stop there. Magic, monsters, giant frogs, aliens, and, yes, even a trip to the land of the dead, are all wedged in sideways; the book almost has the feel of a crazy camp story, one of those, "and then..." improbabilities propelled by sheer energy. The improbable will probably be a little bit too much for adult readers, but when I read parts of it out loud to my eight-year-old son, he loved it; he laughed at the antics of the monkey, smiled gleefully at the idea of being left with a grandmother who didn't much care about food in the living room, and listened, wide-eyed, as Anthony left, pockets full of miniature monsters, on his journey to save the world.

Being Dead, by Vivian Vande Velde, was less cozy, although the title probably gives that away. It's not a novel; it's a collection of short stories about either being dead or being haunted by the dead. I loved Vande Velde's novel *Never Trust a Dead Man* and thoroughly enjoyed *Magic Can Be Murder*, so I came to this with high expectations. I wasn't disappointed. "Drop by Drop," the story that opens the collection, is a ghost story. Brenda, at sixteen years of age, is not a happy young woman. Her parents have inexplicably decided that life in a small town is an acceptable change of pace, and have refused even to consider how painful it is for Brenda to leave all her friends behind. Her brother Danny is too young to be anything other than annoying, and her mother is not exactly a wellspring of parental sympathy. Brenda is determined to cope because she and her friends have all sworn that they'll be together again in college in two long, dismal years.

But the huge new house into

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which they move has another occupant, one who seems to be trying to speak to Brenda. First, there's the phone. It's ringing. And it's not connected. Then there's the hand in a fishpond that doesn't even come up to Brenda's knee. It gets worse, and by story's end, we see why.

It's hard to write a review of a short story collection; too much depends on little twists and turns along the way. But Vande Velde's handling of her characters is deft and true, wry and humorous in a way that hints at the pain of growing up. "Dancing with Marjorie's Ghost" and "The Ghost" are both short, with small twists at the end that carry all of their weight; of the seven, they're the slightest. "Shadow Brother" reaches around the trauma of death and loss in war — in this case the Vietnam war — touching upon survivor guilt in the darkness. "For Love of Him" has a twist ending, but the emotional strength of the story doesn't rely on it; Velde captures the adolescent angst and fear of isolation beautifully here. "October Chill" is not so much about being dead, but dying; and the title story, "Being Dead" is probably the only story in which the death itself made me laugh out loud. I did feel a bit guilty about it afterward, though.

All in all, a good collection, and well worth looking up.

The Wizard's Dilemma by Diane Duane is the fifth in a series of novels about Juanita Callahan (called Nita by pretty much everyone except The Book) and her best friend and partner, Kit. *So You Want To Be A Wizard* started Nita, the often-bullied social outcast, on the road to Wizardry, giving her The Book in which spells — in their mathematical and computational complexity — could be both read and written. It also gave her her first encounter with the Lone One, the being who created death in what might otherwise have been a paradise. Wizards by oath, nature, and desire, are in conflict with the Lone One; they stand for life, and although in the direst of emergencies they are permitted to *take* life, it is never, ever done lightly, and never without a high cost to the killer.

Lone One or not, Nita has had great success as a Wizard, and her social life, while not exactly something to write home about, has at least calmed down enough that she's no longer constantly worried about being beaten up. She's worried about other things instead: the growing rift between herself and Kit, for one.

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And her mother's life, for another, because her mother has been diagnosed with cancer, and the prognosis is Not Good.

All of Duane's novels have, in one way or another, dealt with coming of age. Taking great power, and the fantasy of great power, and understanding that there is a responsibility inherent in its use, is a trope that guides most of the fantasy being written for young adults today. But Duane's fifth novel ups the ante. She has not one, but two young Wizards, both possessed of a great deal of power, who have to deal with the fact that there are some evils that power itself can't combat. That love itself doesn't excuse everything; that it can blind in the most painful of ways.

Nita cannot believe that she can do nothing to help her mother, and because she is so determined, she begins to play god in small universes in an attempt to understand how to restructure reality well enough to restructure her mother — literally.

But the only creature in existence who has control over death is the Lone One, and in the end, Nita has a choice to make — one that Duane implies, artfully and quietly, that all people who would be Wizards must make, in the end.

Duane understands the impulses of the human heart, old and young; she's in fine form here. I'm really looking forward to seeing where Nita and Kit go next.

I read these books, but I was still at a bit of a loss.

And so I turned to Terry Pratchett. This shouldn't come as a surprise; Terry Pratchett novels are books that are stored on a special shelf labeled "for times of unbearable stress," although they could just as easily be stored on a shelf labeled "Read This Now, You Fool" (or a shelf labeled "canned tomatoes," but I digress).

Ever since *Troll Bridge*, I have loved Cohen the Barbarian. In *Interesting Times*, with the gathering of his barbarian horde, I thought he'd found a home and settled down, but apparently he's an old-style hero. They just don't know how to settle down. And it just happens that there's always been a thing or two that he's been itching to do...like, say, sneak into the place the Gods call home and cause a large and memorable disturbance.

Unfortunately, while he's big on cunning, and bigger on survival, he's not always the most intelligent person, and there's a tiny problem with his master plan. Unfortunately

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for him, and vastly more unfortunately for the rest of the Discworld. For us? *The Last Hero* brings Captain Carrot, Rincewind, and Leonard of Quirm into play. And really, how much more can you ask for?

This is supposed to be a lavishly illustrated book. I got a signature with pictures and a bound galley with "A Note to Readers of This Text Only Version." But this text only version is pure Pratchett, and the only complaint that can be made about it at all is that there's only half as much of the Text Only Version as there usually is in a Pratchett novel. It's a pretty small complaint.

I feel, at times, that I should be saying something about Prachett's structure, or his language, or his incredibly acute observations; that I should laud him, as others do, as a satirist, that I should point out that he clearly understands the mythologies that he subverts so well, that I should say something about his contribution to English Literature. But in the end the bald truth is this: I always feel better after reading a Pratchett novel than I did before I started it. Given the events of the past month, a particular line at novel's end stays with me, and it seems appropriate, somehow.

"He'd never been keen on heroes. But he realized that he needed them to be there, like forests and mountains...he might never see them, but they filled some sort of hole in his mind. Some sort of hole in everyone's mind."

I think in some ways, we *did* see them in September, this September.

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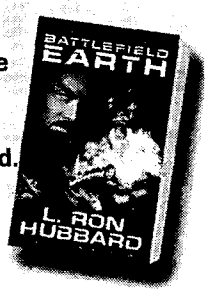

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James P. Kelly is the author of the novels Wildlife, Planet of Whispers, *and* Look into the Sun. *His prodigious short fiction has been collected in several books, including* Think Like a Dinosaur and Other Stories, *and has helped him decorate his New Hampshire home with several awards. His last appearance in our magazine was a story written in collaboration with Jonathan Lethem and John Kessel entitled "Ninety Percent of Everything." He reports that his next collection of stories,* Strange But Not a Stranger, *is due to be published around the beginning of September.*

Here he considers the religious realm—did you not know there are several laws of religion?

The Pyramid of Amirah

By James Patrick Kelly

SOMETIMES AMIRAH THINKS she can sense the weight of the pyramid that entombs her house. The huge limestone blocks seem to crush the air and squeeze light. When she carries the table lamp onto the porch and holds it up to the blank stone, shadows ooze across the rough-cut inner face. If she is in the right mood, they make cars and squirrels and flowers and Mom's face.

Time passes.

Amirah will never see the outside of her pyramid, but she likes to imagine different looks for it. It's like trying on new jeans. They said that the limestone would be cased in some kind of marble they called Rosa Portagallo. She hopes it will be like Betty's Pyramid, red as sunset, glossy as her fingernails. Are they setting it yet? Amirah thinks not. She can still hear the dull, distant *chock* as the believers lower each structural stone into place — twenty a day. Dust wisps from the cracks between the stones and settles through the thick air onto every horizontal surface of her house: the floor, Dad's desk, windowsills and the tops of the kitchen cabinets. Amirah doesn't mind; she goes over the entire house

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periodically with vacuum and rag. She wants to be ready when the meaning comes.

Time passes.

The only thing she really misses is the sun. Well, that isn't true. She misses her Mom and her Dad and her friends on the swim team, especially Janet. She and Janet offered themselves to the meaning at Blessed Finger Sanctuary on Janet's twelfth birthday. Neither of them expected to be chosen pyramid girl. They thought maybe they would be throwing flowers off a float in the Monkey Day parade or collecting door to door for the Lost Brothers. Janet shrieked with joy and hugged her when Mrs. Munro told them the news. If her friend hadn't held her up, Amirah might have collapsed.

Amirah keeps all the lights on, even when she goes to bed. She knows this is a waste of electricity, but it's easier to be brave when the house is bright. Besides, there is nobody to scold her now.

"Is there?" Amirah says, and then she walks into the kitchen to listen. Sometimes the house makes whispery noises when she talks to it. "Is there anyone here who cares what I do?" Her voice sounds like the hinges of the basement door.

Time passes.

They took all the clocks, and she has lost track of day and night. She sleeps when she is tired and eats when she is hungry. That's all there is to do, except wait for the meaning to come. Mom and Dad's bedroom is filled to the ceiling with cartons of Goody-goody Bars: Nut Raisin, Cherry Date, Chocolate Banana, and Cinnamon Apple, which is not her favorite. Mrs. Munro said there were enough to last her for years. At first that was a comfort. Now Amirah tries not to think about it.

Time passes.

Amirah's pyramid is the first in the Tri-City area. They said it would be twenty meters tall. She had worked it out afterward that twenty meters was almost seventy feet. Mom said that if the meaning had first come to Memphis, Tennessee, instead of Memphis, Egypt, then maybe everything would have been in American instead of metric. Dad had laughed at that and said then Elvis would have been the First Brother. Mom didn't like him making fun of the meaning. If she wanted to laugh, she would have him tell one of the Holy Jokes.

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"What's the first law of religion?" Amirah says in her best imitation of Dad's voice.

"For every religion, there exists an equal and opposite religion," she says in Mom's voice.

"What's the second law of religion?" says Dad's voice.

"They're both wrong." Mom always laughs at that.

The silence goes all breathy, like Amirah is holding seashells up to both ears. "I don't get it," she says.

She can't hear building sounds anymore. The dust has stopped falling.

Time passes.

When Amirah was seven, her parents took her to Boston to visit Betty's Pyramid. The bus driver said that the believers had torn down a hundred and fifty houses to make room for it. Amirah could feel Betty long before she could see her pyramid; Mom said the meaning was very strong in Boston.

Amirah didn't understand much about the meaning back then. While the bus was stopped at a light, she had a vision of her heart swelling up inside her like a balloon and lifting her out the window and into the bluest part of the sky where she could see everything there was to see. The whole bus was feeling Betty by then. Dad told the Holy Joke about the chicken and the Bible in a loud voice and soon everyone was laughing so hard that the bus driver had to pull over. She and Mom and Dad walked the last three blocks and the way Amirah remembered it, her feet only touched the ground a couple of times. The pyramid was huge in a way that no skyscraper could ever be. She heard Dad tell Mom it was more like geography than architecture. Amirah was going to ask him what that meant, only she realized that *she* knew because *Betty* knew. The marble of Betty's pyramid was incredibly smooth but it was cold to the touch. Amirah spread the fingers of both hands against it and thought very hard about Betty.

"Are you there, Betty?" Amirah sits up in bed. "What's it like?" All the lights are on in the house. "Betty?" Amirah can't sleep because her stomach hurts. She gets up and goes to the bathroom to pee. When she wipes herself, there in a pinkish stain on the toilet paper.

Time passes.

Amirah also misses Juicy Fruit gum and Onion Taste Tots and 3DV and music. She hasn't seen her shows since Dad shut the door behind him

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and led Mom down the front walk. Neither of them looked back, but she thought Mom might have been crying. Did Mom have doubts? This still bothers Amirah. She wonders what Janet is listening to these days on her earstone. Have the Stiffies released any new songs? When Amirah sings, she practically has to scream or else the pyramid swallows her voice.

"Go, go away, go-go away from me.

Had fun, we're done, whyo-why can't you see?"

Whenever she finishes a Goody-goody bar, she throws the wrapper out the front door. The walk has long since been covered. In the darkness, the wrappers look like fallen leaves.

Time passes.

Both Janet and Amirah had been trying to get Han Biletnikov to notice them before Amirah became pyramid girl. Han had wiry red hair and freckles and played midfield on the soccer team. He was the first boy in their school to wear his pants inside out. On her last day in school, there had been an assembly in her honor and Han had come to the stage and told a Holy Joke about her.

Amirah cups her hands to make her voice sound like it's coming out of a microphone. "What did Amirah say to the guy at the hot dog stand?"

She twists her head to one side to give the audience response. "I don't know, what?"

Han speaks again into the microphone. "Make me one with everything." She can see him now, even though she is sitting at the kitchen table with a glass of water and an unopened Cherry Date Goody-goody bar in front of her. His cheeks are flushed as she strides across the stage to him. He isn't expecting her to do this. The believers go quiet as if someone has thrown a blanket over them. She holds out her hand to shake his and he stares at it. When their eyes finally meet, she can see his awe; she's turned into President Huong, or maybe Billy Tiger, the forward for the Boston Flash. His hand is warm, a little sweaty. Her fingertips brush the hollow of his palm.

"Thank you," says Amirah.

Han doesn't say anything. He isn't there. Amirah unwraps the Goody-goody bar.

Time passes.

Amirah never gets used to having her period. She thinks she isn't

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doing it right. Mom never told her how it worked and she didn't leave pads or tampons or anything. Amirah wads toilet paper into her panties, which makes her feel like she's walking around with a sofa cushion between her legs. The menstrual blood smells like vinegar. She takes a lot of baths. Sometimes she touches herself as the water cools and then she feels better for a while.

Time passes.

Amirah wants to imagine herself kissing Han Biletnikov, but she can't. She keeps seeing Janet's lips on his, her tongue darting into his mouth. At least, that's how Janet said people kiss. She wonders if she would have better luck if she weren't in the kitchen. She climbs the stairs to her bedroom and opens the door. It's dark. The light has burned out. She pulls down the diffuser and unscrews the bulb. It's clear and about the size of a walnut. It says:

"Whose lifetime?" she says. The pile of Goody-goody wrappers on the front walk is taller than Dad. Amirah tries to think where there might be extra light bulbs. She pulls the entire house apart looking for them but she doesn't cry.

Time passes.

Amirah is practicing living in the dark. Well, it isn't entirely dark; she has left a light on in the hallway. But she is in the living room, staring out the picture window at nothing. The fireplace is gray on black; the couch across the room swells in the darkness, soaking up gloom like a sponge.

There are eight light bulbs left. She carries one in Mom's old purse, protected by an enormous wad of toilet paper. The weight of the strap on her shoulder is as reassuring as a hug. Amirah misses hugs. She never puts the purse down.

Amirah notices that it is particularly dark at the corner where the walls and the ceiling meet. She gets out of Dad's reading chair, arms stretched before her. She is going to try to shut the door to the hallway. She doesn't know if she can; she has never done it before.

"Where was Moses when the lights went out?" she says.

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No one answers, not even in her imagination. She fumbles for the doorknob.

"Where was Mohammed when the lights went out?" Her voice is shrinking.

As she eases the door shut, the hinges complain.

"Where was Amirah went the lights went out?"

The latch bolt *snicks* home but Amirah keeps pressing hard against the knob, then leans into the door with her shoulder. The darkness squeezes her; she can't breathe. A moan pops out of her mouth like a seed and she pivots suddenly, pressing her back against the door.

Something flickers next to the couch, low on the wall. A spark, blue as her dreams. It turns sapphire, cerulean, azure, indigo, all the colors that only poets and painters can see. The blue darts out of the electrical outlet like a tongue. She holds out her hands to navigate across the room to it and notices an answering glow, pale as mothers' milk, at her fingertips. Blue tongues are licking out of every plug in the living room and Amirah doesn't need to grope anymore. She can see everything, the couch, the fireplace, all the rooms of the house and through the pyramid walls into the city. It's one city now, not three.

Amirah raises her arms above her head because her hands are blindingly bright and she can see Dad with his new wife watching the Red Sox on 3DV. Someone has planted pink miniature roses on Mom's grave. Janet is looking into little Freddy Cobb's left ear with her otoscope and Han is having late lunch at Sandeens with a married imagineer named Shawna Russo and Mrs. Munro has dropped a stitch on the cap she is knitting for her great-grandson Matthias. At that moment everyone who Amirah sees, thousands of believers, *tens* of thousands, stop what they are doing and turn to the pyramid, *Amirah's* pyramid, which has been finished for these seventeen years but has never meant anything to anyone until now. Some smile with recognition; a few clap. Others — most of them, Amirah realizes — are now walking toward her pyramid, to be close to her and caress the cold marble and know what she knows. The meaning is suddenly very strong in the city, like the perfume of lilacs or the suck of an infant at the breast or the whirr of a hummingbird.

"Amirah?" Betty opens the living room door. She is a beautiful young girl with gray hair and crow's feet around her sky blue eyes. "Are you there, Amirah?"

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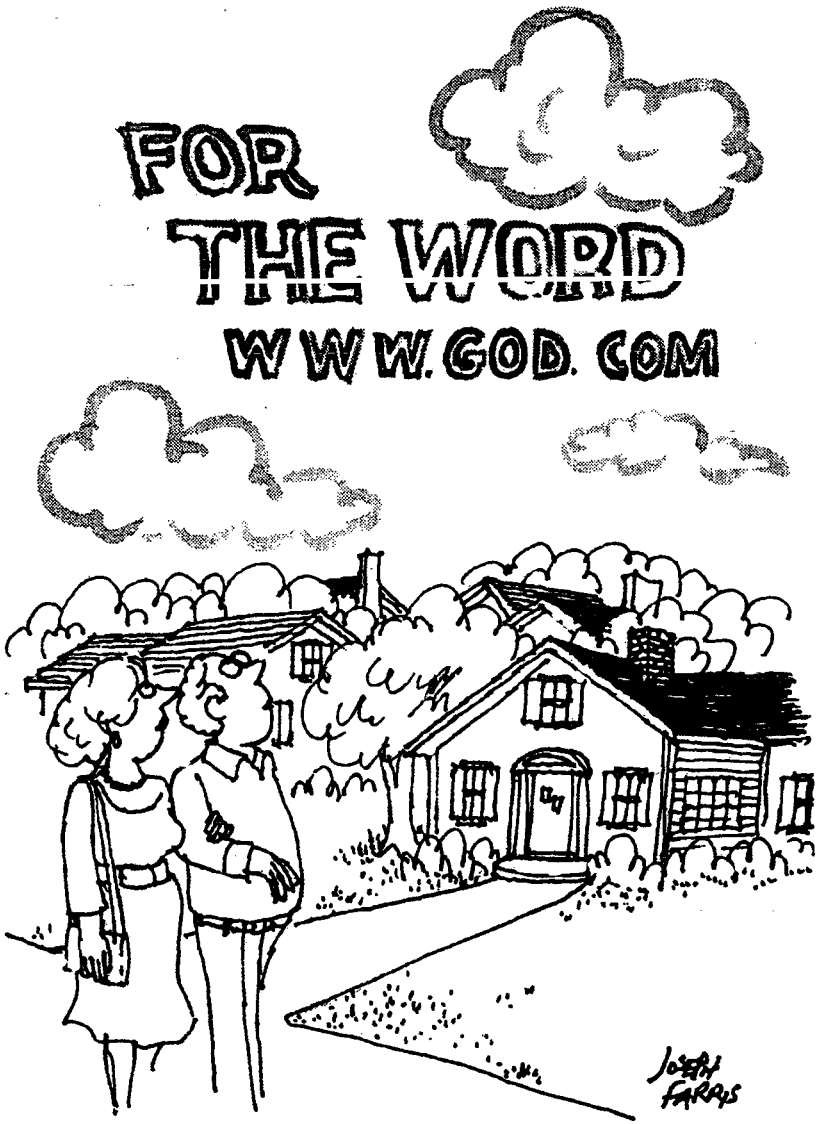
"Yes," says Amirah.
"Do you understand?"
"Yes," Amirah says. When she laughs, time stands still.



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The author of such distinctive novels as Carmen Dog, Ledoyt, *and the forthcoming* The Mount, *Carol Emshwiller has been one of our more prolific and more popular writers over the past few years. Her recent stories include "Foster Mother" and its sequel "Creature." Now she dons cape, cowl, and utility belt to leap into the realm of popular culture with an unusual take on the subject of superheroism.*

Grandma

By Carol Emshwiller

GRANDMA USED TO BE A woman of action. She wore tights. She had big boobs, but a teeny weeny bra. Her waist used to be twenty-four inches. Before she got so hunched over she could do way more than a hundred of everything, pushups, sit-ups, chinning.... She had naturally curly hair. Now it's dry and fine and she's a little bit bald. She wears a babushka all the time and never takes her teeth out when I'm around or lets me see where she keeps them, though of course I know. She won't say how old she is. She says the books about her are all wrong, but, she says, that's her own fault. For a long while she lied about her age and other things, too.

She used to be on every search and rescue team all across these mountains. I think she might still be able to rescue people. Small ones. Her set of weights is in the basement. She has a punching bag. She used to kick it, too, but I don't know if she still can do that. I hear her thumping and grunting around down there — even now when she needs a cane for walking. And talk about getting up off the couch!

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I go down to that gym myself sometimes and try to lift those weights. I punch at her punching bag. (I can't reach it except by standing on a box. When I try to kick it, I always fall over.)

Back in the olden days Grandma wasn't as shy as she is now. How could she be and do all she did? But now she doesn't want to be a bother. She says she never wanted to be a bother, just help out is all.

She doesn't expect any of us to follow in her footsteps. She used to, but not anymore. We're a big disappointment. She doesn't say so, but we have to be. By now she's given up on all of us. Everybody has.

It started...*we* started with the idea of selective breeding. Everybody wanted more like Grandma: strong, fast thinking, fast acting, and with the *desire*...that's the most important thing...a desire for her kind of life, a life of several hours in the gym every single day. Grandma loved it. She says (and says and says), "I'd turn on some banjo music and make it all into a dance."

Back when Grandma was young, offspring weren't even thought of since who was there around good enough for her to marry? Besides, everybody thought she'd last forever. How could somebody like her get old? is what they thought.

She had three..."husbands" they called them, (donors more like it) first a triathlon champion, then a prize fighter, then a ballet dancer.

There's this old wives tale of skipping generations, so, after nothing good happened with her children, Grandma (and everybody else) thought, surely it would be us grandchildren. But we're a motley crew. Nobody pays any attention to us anymore.

I'm the runt. I'm small for my age, my foot turns in, my teeth stick out, I have a lazy eye.... There's lots of work to be done on me. Grandma's paying for all of it though she knows I'll never amount to much of anything. I wear a dozen different kinds of braces, teeth, feet, a patch over my good eye. My grandfather, the ballet dancer!

Sometimes I wonder why Grandma does all this for me, a puny, limping, limp-haired girl? What I think is, I'm her *real* baby at last. They didn't let her have any time off to look after her own children — not ever until now when she's too old for rescuing people. She not only was on all the search and rescue teams, she was a dozen search and rescue teams all by herself, and often she had to rescue the search and rescue teams.

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Not only that, she also rescued animals. She always said the planet would die without its creatures. You'd see her leaping over mountains with a deer under each arm. She moved bears from camp grounds to where they wouldn't cause trouble. You'd see her with handfuls of rattlesnakes gathered from golf courses and carports, flying them off to places where people would be safe from them and they'd be safe from people.

She even tried to rescue the climate, pulling and pushing at the clouds. Holding back floods. Reraveling the ozone. She carried huge sacks of water to the trees of one great dying forest. In the long run there was only failure. Even after all those rescues, always only failure. The bears came back. The rattlesnakes came back.

Grandma gets to thinking all her good deeds went wrong. Lots of times she had to let go and save...maybe five babies and drop three. I mean even Grandma only had two arms. She expected more of herself. I always say, "You did save lots of people. You kept that forest alive ten years longer than expected. And me. *I'm* saved." That always makes her laugh, and I *am* saved. She says, "I guess my one good eye can see well enough to look after you, you rapscallion."

She took me in after my parents died. (She couldn't save them. There are some things you just can't do anything about no matter who you are, like drunken drivers. Besides, you can't be everywhere.)

When she took me to care for, she was already feeble. We needed each other. She'd never be able to get along without me. I'm the saver of the saver.

How did we end up this way, way out here in the country with me her only helper? Did she scare everybody else off with her neediness? Or maybe people couldn't stand to see how far down she's come from what she used to be. And I suppose she has gotten difficult, but I'm used to her. I hardly notice. But she's so busy trying not to be a bother she's a bother. I have to read her mind. When she holds her arms around herself, I get her old red sweatshirt with her emblem on the front. When she says, "*Oh* dear," I get her a cup of green tea. When she's on the couch and struggles and leans forward on her cane, trembling, I pull her up. She likes quiet. She likes for me to sit by her, lean against her, and listen to the birds along with her. Or listen to her stories. We don't have a radio or TV set. They conked out a long time ago and no one thought to get us new ones, but we don't need them. We never wanted them in the first place.

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Grandma sits me down beside her, the lettuce planted, the mulberries picked, sometimes a mulberry pie already made (I helped), and we just sit. "I had a grandma," she'll say, "though I know, to look at me, it doesn't seem like I could have. I'm older than most grandmas ever get to be, but we all had grandmas, even me. Picture that: Every single person in the world with a grandma." Then she giggles. She still has her girlish giggle. She says, "Mother didn't know what to make of me. I was opening her jars for her before I was three years old. Mother.... Even that was a long time ago."

When she's in a sad mood she says everything went wrong. People she had just rescued died a week later of something that Grandma couldn't have helped. Hantavirus or some such that they got from vacuuming a closed room, though sometimes Grandma had just warned them not to do that. (Grandma believes in prevention as much as in rescuing.)

I've rescued things. Lots of them. Nothing went wrong either. I rescued a junco with a broken wing. After rains I've rescued stranded worms from the wet driveway and put them back in our vegetable garden. I didn't let Grandma cut the suckers off our fruit trees. I rescued mice from sticky traps. I fed a litter of feral kittens and got fleas and worms from them. Maybe this rescuing is the one part of Grandma I inherited.

Who's to say which is more worthwhile, pushing atom bombs far out into space or one of these little things I do? Well, I do know which is more important, but if I were the junco I'd like being rescued.

Sometimes Grandma goes out, though rarely. She gets to feeling it's a necessity. She wears sunglasses and a big floppy hat and scarves that hide her wrinkled-up face and neck. She still rides a bicycle. She's so wobbly it's scary to see her trying to balance herself down the road. I can't look. She likes to bring back ice-cream for me, maybe get me a comic book and a licorice stick to chew on as I read it. I suppose in town they just take her for a crazy lady, which I guess she is.

When visitors come to take a look at her I always say she isn't home, but where else would a very, very, very old lady be but mostly home? If she knew people had come she'd have hobbled out to see them and probably scared them half to death. And they probably wouldn't have believed it was her, anyway. Only the president of the Town and Country Bank — she

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rescued him a long time ago — I let him in. He'll sit with her for a while. He's old but of course not as old as she is. And he likes her for herself. They talked all through his rescue and really got to know each other back then. They talked about tomato plants and wildflowers and birds. When she rescued him they were flying up with the wild geese. (They still talk about all those geese they flew with and how exciting that was with all the honking and the sound of wings flapping right beside them. I get goose bumps — geese bumps? — just hearing them talk about it.) She should have married somebody like him, potbelly, pock-marked face and all. Maybe we'd have turned out better.

I GUESS YOU COULD SAY I'm the one that killed her — *caused* her death, anyway. I don't know what got into me. Lots of times I don't know what gets into me and lots of times I kind of run away for a couple of hours. Grandma knows about it. She doesn't mind. Sometimes she even tells me, "Go on. Get out of here for a while." But this time I put on her old tights and one of the teeny tiny bras. I don't have breasts yet so I stuffed the cups with Kleenex. I knew I couldn't do any of the things Grandma did, I just thought it would be fun to pretend for a little while.

I started out toward the hill. It's a long walk but you get to go through a batch of piñons. But first you have to go up an arroyo. Grandma's cape dragged over the rocks and sand behind me. It was heavy, too. To look at the satiny red outside you'd think it would be light, but it has a felt lining. "Warm and waterproof," Grandma said. I could hardly walk. How did she ever manage to fly around in it?

I didn't get very far before I found a jackrabbit lying in the middle of the arroyo half dead (but half alive, too), all bit and torn. I'll bet I'm the one that scared off whatever it was that did that. That rabbit was a goner if I didn't rescue it. I was a little afraid because wounded rabbits bite. Grandma's cape was just the right thing to wrap it in so it wouldn't.

Those jackrabbits weigh a lot. And with the added weight of the cape....

Well, all I did was sprain my ankle. I mean I wasn't really hurt. I always have the knife Grandma gave me. I cut some strips off the cape and bound myself up good and tight. It isn't as if Grandma has a lot of capes.

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This is her only one. I felt bad about cutting it. I put the rabbit across my shoulders. It was slow going but I wasn't leaving the rabbit for whatever it was to finish eating it. It began to be twilight. Grandma knows I can't see well in twilight. The trouble is, though she used to see like an eagle, Grandma can't see very well anymore either.

She tried to fly, as she used to do. She *did* fly. For my sake. She skimmed along just barely above the sage and bitterbrush, her feet snagging at the taller ones. That was all the lift she could get. I could see, by the way she leaned and flopped like a dolphin, that she was trying to get higher. She was calling, "Sweetheart. Sweetheart. Where are yooooowwww?" Her voice was almost as loud as it used to be. It echoed all across the mountains.

"Grandma, go back. I'll be all right." My voice can be loud, too.

She heard me. Her ears are still as sharp as a mule's.

The way she flew was kind of like she rides a bicycle. All wobbly. Veering off from side to side, up and down, too. I knew she would crack up. And she looked funny flying around in her print dress. She only has one costume and I was wearing it.

"Grandma, go back. Please go back."

She wasn't at all like she used to be. A little fall like that from just a few feet up would never have hurt her a couple of years ago. Or even last year. Even if, as she did, she landed on her head.

I covered her with sand and brush as best I could. No doubt whatever was about to eat the rabbit would come gnaw on her. She wouldn't mind. She always said she wanted to give herself back to the land. She used to quote, I don't know from where, "All to the soil, nothing to the grave." Getting eaten is *sort* of like going to the soil.

I don't dare tell people what happened — that it was all my fault — that I got myself in trouble sort of on purpose, trying to be like her, trying to rescue something.

But I'm not as sad as you might think. I knew she would die pretty soon anyway and this is a better way than in bed looking at the ceiling, maybe in pain. If that had happened, she wouldn't have complained. She'd not have said a word, trying not to be a bother. Nobody would have known

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about the pain except me. I would have had to grit my teeth against her pain the whole time.

I haven't told anybody partly because I'm waiting to figure things out. I'm here all by myself, but I'm good at looking after things. There are those who check on us every weekend — people who are paid to do it. I wave at them. "All okay." I mouth it. The president of the Town and Country Bank came out once. I told him Grandma wasn't feeling well. It wasn't *exactly* a lie. How long can this go on? He'll be the one who finds out first — if anybody does. Maybe they won't.

I'm nursing my jackrabbit. We're friends now. He's getting better fast. Pretty soon I'll let him go off to be a rabbit. But he might rather stay here with me.

I'm wearing Grandma's costume most of the time now. I sleep in it. It makes me feel safe. I'm doing my own little rescues as usual. (The vegetable garden is full of happy weeds. I keep the bird feeder going. I leave scraps out for the skunk.) Those count — almost as much as Grandma's rescues did. Anyway, I know the weeds think so.

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

Press One for Literature

"The May meeting of the Bedford-Shire Book Group was a bit out of the ordinary.... [T]he phone rang [and] on the line was Donna Woolfolk Cross, the author of the group's reading selection. For the next hour and a half, via speakerphone, Ms. Cross led a discussion about her historical novel *Pope Joan*. ...[S]ince *Pope Joan* came out in paperback nearly four years ago, she has placed calls to more than 350 book groups, sometimes devoting four or five evenings a week to the practice.... [On her website] Ms. Cross offers to call any group that chooses the book...."

— Pamela LiCalzi O'Connell, "Authors Go Directly to Reader With Marketing," *The New York Times*, May 28, 2001.

OF COURSE the phone rang just when the whole blessed family was sitting down to dinner. I had worked for hours that day making the family's favorite meal: fried chicken according to Aunt Minnie's classic recipe, pineapple jello salad from a feature in *Woman's World*, fresh green beans with almond slices (that garnish was my own idea), and, for dessert, peach cobbler. And now the whole beautiful banquet was going to go cold (or in the case of the jello salad, get warm), due to some stupid telemarketer. Sam and the kids looked at me expectantly. Not one of the four seemed willing or able to get up from the table and answer the ringing phone. So I sighed, wiped my hands on my apron and said, "Oh, all right, I'll get it!"

"Cut 'em off quick," Sam said. "I can hardly wait to dig in!"

"Me too!" chimed Greg, the oldest. The twins, Lisa and Amy, weighed in with a wailed, "We're starving!"

Naturally, I was a little curt with my hello. But the perky female voice on the other end of the line didn't seem to notice or mind my irritation.

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"Hello! Am I speaking to Wanda Jo Brasch?"

"Yes. How can I help you?"

"This is Nora Roberts, the author, calling."

I could hardly believe my ears. "Is this some kind of joke? Madge, is that you?"

"I'm not your friend, Madge, Wanda Jo. May I call you by your first name? I'd like you to call me Nora."

"Well, that's all right, I guess — Nora." Sam and the kids were making shoveling motions with their empty forks to indicate I should wind this up. But I couldn't just end this interesting interruption so abruptly, without letting this woman tell me why she was calling. What if I really was talking to the one and only Nora Roberts?

"Wanda Jo, a little bird tells me that you're currently reading one of my books. Is that correct?"

"Why, uh, yes, it is. However did you know?"

"Oh, just a simple combination of access to your purchase records at Border's and some friendly neighborhood snooping by a reputable nationwide agency. May I ask how you're enjoying it?"

"Oh, it's great. Maybe not as good as your last one, but easily as enjoyable as the one before that."

"Wanda Jo, I appreciate your frankness. Such candor is precisely the reason I'm calling. I need feedback like yours to help make my next book as good as possible. And I want to insure that you enjoy this current one as much as its hopefully minor flaws will permit. Do you have an hour or so free now so we can have a cozy chat about the novel?" Greg was clutching his stomach and miming cramps. Sam had buried his head in his folded arms upon the table. The twins were turning red as they held their breath.

"Um, Nora, this is not such a great time. Could you call back later tonight?"

"Certainly, Wanda Jo. I understand intimately the unspoken depths and heights of family dynamics. That's why the last five of my novels have all perched on the bestseller lists for an average of ten weeks apiece. We'll talk later. Goodbye, and thanks for your time."

I hung up, feeling rather dazed. Luckily, not one of my "starving" family members even inquired about the nature of the call, which was fine, since I didn't feel I could really explain.

Just as the basket of chicken was being passed around, the phone rang again.

Sam bolted to his feet. "I'll get

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this one! We're not going to have another gabfest with strangers stalling our dinner!"

Sam practically yanked the phone off the wall and yelled, "Yes, who is this!" But he immediately calmed down. "Well, of course I do, I just bought a copy. Man, you know I do! Right now?" He glanced toward me and his glowering offspring, then said, "Jeez, I can't right at the minute, Kenny. You'll call back? Great!"

Returning to his seat, Sam was practically glowing. "Can you all guess who that was? Kenny Rogers! He knew somehow that I had picked up his autobiography yesterday at the airport bookstore, and he wanted to fill me in on some of the saucy stuff that his lawyers made him leave out!"

Greg said, "Cool, you got a call from some boring old hillbilly. Can we eat now, please?"

"Greg, you watch how you talk to your father. Apologize right now."

"Oh, man.... Sooorr-ee!"

Our plates were half filled when the phone rang yet again. As if to make up for his smart mouth and maybe to deal more quickly with these annoying calls than his elders could, Greg jumped up to answer.

"Wassup? No way! Yeah, Mick, it rocked! An hour? Can't do it, big guy. Later for sure, though. Chill."

Now it was Greg's turn to strut. "You know anyone else at Ogilvy High who gets calls from big-name pro wrestlers? That was Mick 'Mankind' Foley, asking me what I thought of his last book. I figure I'll tell him to put more pictures of half-naked chicks in."

Well, boys will be boys.

We managed actually to savor a few bites before the phone rang again. I caught it this time.

"Girls, it's for you."

Lisa and Amy held the receiver between them so they could both hear. Immediately they let loose that dual squeal of theirs that once actually shattered Uncle Henry's commemorative Gallo wine decanter. "Oh, that is so fabulous! Sure, we're wearing your clothes right now! And your book! Of course we've got your book! Oh, darn, we're in the middle of dinner. You really don't mind? Okay, bye!"

The two girls practically threw themselves on me, almost making me spill some Crystal Light. "Mom, Mom, that was Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen! We talked to the Olsen Twins! Everyone at school is going to be like so super-jealous!"

"Well now, girls, the Olsen Twins might very well be calling

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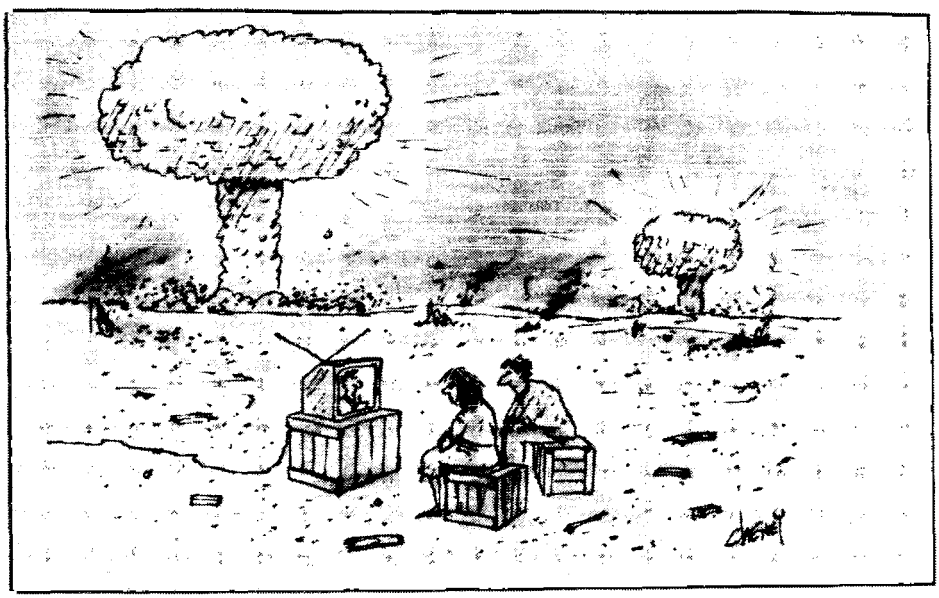
other people up tonight too. We can't be the only lucky ones in town. In fact, I bet authors all across this great nation of ours are phoning households everywhere even as we speak, just to see if their readers are happy. That's what makes them such special people, worthy of our respect and admiration. Now, sit down and tuck in."

We ate in silence for a while. All of us, I guess, were contemplating what they'd say when they got their return calls tonight from Nora, Kenny, "Mankind," and the Olsens. A niggling little worry occurred to me then. But Greg, God bless him, opened his mouth and I was certain he was reading my mind and would say something about adding another phone line to the house when he surprised me instead with, "I'll just have to read President Clinton's memoir next!"



"In other news, internet stocks continue to surge higher despite the end of the world."

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In our March 2000 issue, Albert Cowdrey introduced us to the future with "Crux." In it, he imagined a time several centuries hence, well after the Time of Troubles, in which Asian supremacy has led to a world that sometimes resembles one of George Orwell's nightmares. Mr. Cowdrey returned to the same world with "Mosh" in our December 2000 issue. Hand over your passport now so you can pass into the future and enjoy this twisty tale.

Ransom

By Albert E. Cowdrey

Fifth Avenue, November 2091.

ON THE STEPS OF THE NEW Plaza Hotel, holographic cameras record a model clothed in a brilliant smile and body-stocking as she runs to the golden doors, pauses, loses her smile, descends, and repeats the process. (Later on, software will morph outfits onto her image.) A crowd gawks at the model; a cop hefts a machine pistol and eyes the crowd.

Then a new excitement: led by motorcycles with screaming sirens, a fourteen-meter limousine slides past the tangle of bare branches in Central Park, past Grand Army Plaza, and whispers to the curb in front of the armored facade of Tiffany-Cartier. A guard jumps out and Benjamin Kurosawa follows, glossy in a $2,000,000 Armani suit.

A famous Wall Street bear who made trillions on the collapse of the market, "Benjo" (as his ex-wives and the tabloids call him) likes to sock solid chunks of his wealth into gems. Only last month he made the news by adding the most famous of stones, the Hope Diamond, to his collection.

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A new crowd of gawkers takes form. Sidewalk vendors arrive to cry their wares of roasted chestnuts, fake jewelry, hashish. A member of the Beggar's Guild displays surgically implanted scars and a sign that says VETERAN OF THE WAR IN IDAHO. Stringers for news organizations appear from nowhere, looking for soundbites. A tall youngish man sprints up and reaches out an odd-looking microphone. The guard frowns but hangs back; the financier revels in fame as he does in wealth.

"*Cybertattle*, Benjo! You adding to your famous diamond collection?"

He thrusts the gadget so close that Kurosawa automatically puts up a hand and pushes it away. There's a strange flicker, a little whirlwind blows up a micro-storm of paper and plastic scraps from the sidewalk, and somebody begins to scream. A stringer for the *Times-Enquirer* Syndicate starts babbling into a jabber mike.

"Instant news! The world's richest man has just been kidnapped! How? Nobody knows. Why? For the ransom, stupid!"

The news hits the airwaves just as an incoming thermal cluster aggregating 2,000 megatons puts an end to the city and everybody in it. Three centuries will pass before anyone knows for sure how right the newscaster was. By then Benjo Kurosawa is being held for ransom — in a way entirely new to human experience.

"Congratulations to you, Major Hastings!" cried Xian Xi-qing.

The ancient Solar System Controller fondled an exquisite pectoral of nineteen ginger-colored diamonds. Autominers gnawing tunnels awash in brine and eerily lit by radioactive fires recently recovered it from a vault hidden deep beneath the fused silicon of the Great North American Shield.

Hastings Maks bowed. Xian made him uneasy, partly because of her incredible *mosh* — power in Alspeke, the only language that all humans spoke — and partly because her appetite for jewels was matched only by her well-known appetite for young men. With a new wife waiting for him at home, Maks much preferred to satisfy her itch for jewels.

General Yamashita, the Chief of Security, glanced proudly at his protégé, the timesurfer whose rise in the Security Forces dated back to the conspiracy of Zo Lian. Together he and Maks had saved this marvelous world — Xian and Ulanor the Worldcity and the stern civilization of order and rank and power they embodied. Yamashita's face, untouched by heat, cold, or pity,

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showed none of his feelings; yet two other people in the hall were sharply aware of his fatherly pride in Maks. One was Maks himself. The other?

Standing next to a heavily armed Darksider that was one of Xian's guards, Colonel Yost, Yama's deputy, looked on, pale, immobile, and silent. Fate had made Yost the Chief's shadow, brain trust and whipping boy. But nothing of what he might be feeling showed on his long, grayish intellectual-looking face. In the Security Forces feelings were hidden; silence and secrecy were the rules of survival.

"You say a person named Kurosawa directed the miners to this marvel?" Xian asked.

"Yes, Honored Controller," Maks replied. "He's been a fine source. The twenty-first century was a time of disorder and the rich buried their possessions. Wonderful things have come to light in the vaults, curious inventions, rare books, archives of secret documents, ancient timepieces, works of art. Mediscans of our captives have allowed the *mediki* to study changes in the human genome — "

"Yes, yes," she said. "I'm sure someone will find all that very interesting."

She extended a tiny hand like a bird's nest, every stick-like finger heavy with glinting rings. Maks was allowed to kiss it, a rare privilege.

"Keep him busy," she told Yamashita. "And now, Honored Chief of Security, we permit you to go."

The three officers bowed and retreated in reverse order of rank: Maks first, then Yost, then Yamashita, who was privileged to enjoy Xian's presence longest. When goldleafed doors at last closed behind him, the Controller was still playing with her baubles.

"Great Tao," the general muttered, "she's in her second childhood."

"What a pity!" Yost said. "Such a great leader in her time! Now all she wants are pretty jewels and young lovers."

"Luckily, we only have to supply the jewels," growled Yamashita. "The Security Forces aren't pimps."

"At least not yet," sighed Yost. "Who knows what we may come to in time?"

Ulanor the Worldcity, capital of the human species, like all the great cities of history had both its palaces and its cramped, commonplace warrens where ordinary people lived. In one such place — a small

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apartment on the campus of the University of the Universe — Steffens Maia ordered her mashina to show the public information channel.

In fact she only wanted to sleep. Sleep was her refuge. She was young, and yet everything seemed to tire her since Maks had left her for his new wife. For a while, anger had sustained her — that was when she took back the family name she'd voluntarily forfeited when she married.

Then anger had subsided into a long, dull depression. The news meant nothing to her but she found the flat, atonal voice of the journalistic software hypnotic, soothing.

Today the program began as usual with a shot of the pompous tomb of Steffens Aleksandr, the hero who had saved the world by defeating the infamous Crux plot. That Maia (and twenty thousand or so other people) shared the Worldsaver's name was one of minor ironies of her obscure life. Then the camera rose until the white-marble surroundings of the tomb — the President's Palace, the Senate of the Worlds — lay revealed like a dinosaurs' graveyard. Brief clips of important personages and events followed, ending with a shot of celebrities boarding an earthliner to vacation spots like Antartica and the North American Game Preserve.

"Oh, Great Tao," Maia breathed, sitting up.

All the travelers had the oiled, glowing look of success; among them were Honored Senator So-and-so, Honored Monopolist Such-and-such, Honored Senator Whatever. Last came Major Hastings Maks, brave timesurfer, and his new wife Sherí.

The couple paused to smile at the camera, Maks solid, handsome; Sherí smiling shyly, her flame-colored hair piled up in fashionable disarray.

Maia devoured every detail of her replacement, from Sherí's stunning physical beauty to the little gap between her upper front teeth. Then a dark, slender man in Security Forces uniform glided up and presented her a blazing armful of peonies.

"On behalf of General Yamashita," said the flat voice, "Captain Pali of the Security Forces presents a bouquet to the happy couple. In other news — "

"Oh, fuck," said Maia. "Shit. Off!"

She threw a pillow at the now-silent mashina and stretched out wearily on her lumpy divan. Yamashita's fair-haired boy. Maks, Maks, she thought for the thousandth time, what happened to you?

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"You didn't have to surrender *unconditionally*," she'd told him once, when their marriage was falling apart.

"I didn't surrender. I grew up."

"When we met, you were ready to ditch the Security Forces, get out, live some other kind of life. Now you want to be a general. Keep this up and you'll be conducting *shosho* sessions next."

"That's not funny."

"Torture's not funny? I thought all you thuggi enjoyed it."

Maia had a gift for the cutting phrase. At the university she taught Ancient Poetry. Many of her poets had possessed the same dangerous gift and some had been executed for indulging it. Their fate should have warned her that the wrong phrase can cost you your head — or your happiness.

"You think you're going to run the Security Forces one day," she couldn't resist adding. "Well, you won't. You're not mean enough and you're not smart enough, either."

Maks had given her a dead-level look that reminded her uneasily of the fact that he'd killed at least one man. Then he left on another of his perilous transits to the ancient world on the eve of the Time of Troubles. When he returned, he moved out and sent her an electronic Message of Divorce.

He didn't take their son, Sandi, away from her; in fact, Maks came to see him often and provided well for him. The last trace she could find of the old Maks, a little dumb but sweet-tempered and generous and a wonderful lover. Later she heard he'd married a gorgeous woman from the frontiers of space, from some rock in the infinitely remote Dragon Sector. Probably an adventuress who'd come to the capital in search of exactly what she'd found — a handsome husband on the way up.

Time traveler finds happiness with space traveler, Maia thought. Like goes to like. It's an old story. All the most painful stories are old ones.

Sighing, she laid her head back on a pillow made in the shape of a haknim. Those gawky, giraffe-like creatures had been favorites of hers since childhood. Sandi, of course, preferred stuffed Darksiders carrying toy guns...how like a male, she thought, eyes fluttering shut — especially an eight-year-old one....

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She woke up feeling refreshed. Sleep. Great nature's second course, the death of each day's life. The ancient poets had a line for everything. She sat up on her bed, yawned, glanced at the clock. And gasped.

Seventeen. She'd slept for 140 minutes — almost an hour and a half. Where was Sandi? Had he come home from school, let himself in?

Anxious, she rose and hastened through her small apartment that overlooked the campus. Sandi was not in his room. Nor the kitchen. Nor anywhere.

She hurried to her small, battered mashina and said, "Call." It flickered into life and she gave the boxcode of his school. After a lengthy wait the nightguard answered.

"Damn," she muttered.

The guard was a black box. When she had asked for a trace on Sandi it beeped and spent a number of minutes doing, apparently, nothing at all. Then its atonal voice announced:

"Doorguard reports Hastings Aleksandr, 8.5 years, male, firstform, left school 15.55. Vehicle sensors report him not present. Report forwarded to Master's office but Master himself left at 15.61. Can I in any other way assist you, Madam?"

"*Where is my son?*"

"Shall I repeat my previous report?"

She cut the connection and headed for the lift. Oh, if the little bastard's just playing a trick on me, she promised, I'll kill him.

In the street she hastened to the nearest gate in the campus wall. The gatekeeper — another black box — informed her that Sandi had not come in. She wondered if he might have squeezed through one of the many breaks in the wall and be playing on campus; if so, he would come home when he felt hungry. For the moment, she'd better consider the worse possibilities.

She rejected a hovercab as too expensive and hastened down the broken and rutted street to a trirad stand. She paid half a khan to a driver and climbed into the dirty vehicle. He revved the whining motor and they set out for Sandi's school, through the streets of the slum quarter that surrounded the university.

Dusk was approaching when they arrived. She questioned the gatekeeper, which repeated that Sandi had left at 1555.

"Did he climb on the bus?"

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"That is the concern of the vehicular sensor, Madame."

"So there's a break in observation as the kids leave school — between the time you stop watching them and the vehicle starts?"

"I am not able to answer that question."

"Fuck you very much."

"That phrase is not in my vocabulary, Honored Mother."

At least the trirad was run by a human. She explained that she wanted to retrace the route to the campus slowly, keeping an eye out for a small boy in a school uniform.

"Your kid go missing, Lady?"

"Yes. I'm terribly worried."

"I would be too, lady. They sell little kids to the houses in the Clouds and Rain District. Some guys will pay a lot for a kid."

The red light district was named for a poetic Chinese description of intercourse, the "play of clouds and rain." Little that went on there was poetic, especially the rumored sale and rape of children.

"This boy's father is a major in the Security Forces."

"Oh, lady, I'm so glad I ain't the one stole your kid. The bastard did it will get *shosho* for sure."

The trirad was at best a clumsy vehicle. Its three-wheel base was unstable and Maia began to feel seasick as she scanned the rising and falling faces to either side of her.

The streets were crowded. Kif sellers, peddlers of babaku chicken with texasauce, of miso, of combs and brushes, of incense. Everywhere she saw places where Sandi could have disappeared from view. A small boy could be anywhere, playing, skylarking, visiting a friend, eating a plate of noodles. Or being drugged, sold, raped, killed.

Back at the university she paid off the driver and almost ran to the gatekeeper. No, Sandi hadn't come back that way. Back in her apartment, she found silence, the same quiet small rooms with nobody in them. At last she collapsed in front of her mashina and said, "Call."

It waited politely, then prompted: "Boxcode, Madam?"

"I don't know," said Maia. "Tell the Security Forces operator I must contact Major Hastings Maks. Say it's an emergency. Say that his son is missing."

* * *

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Maks and Sherí shared an outside compartment on the earthliner.

"Great Tao, but that last transit was a bastard," he sighed. "I misjudged the time and got out just minutes before the Troubles started."

"You so bravely, Maks," said Sherí automatically.

Smiling wearily, he corrected her grammar. Admittedly, she'd grown up in a primitive world, but you couldn't get along in the Worldcity without a good command of Alspeke.

She frowned. Didn't like being corrected, even (or perhaps especially) when she was wrong. She had a sharp tongue, thought about using it on him, then changed her mind.

No, you catch more flies with honey than vinegar, as Mama used to say. Besides, the sights passing below the earthliner were genuinely fascinating.

The Polar Ocean, creamy with whitecaps, flecked with blood by the lowering sun. Vast Hudson Sea. The Sanlornz River, foaming over submerged rocks that had once been the Thousand Islands. Maks napped and Sherí stroked his head, gazing down at the Atlantic coast, the lines of silvery breakers washing against the foothills of the White Mountains.

Maks woke and sat up, sleep clearing from his eyes. Her beauty was profiled by the sunset glow. The pale skin with rose highlights, the burnished hair, the gray eyes — the meeting of fire and ice. He kissed her white shoulder and the smell of her flesh reminded him of the cakes that Tartar women pressed from curds of milk on the herd-rich Gobi grasslands south of the Worldcity.

Suddenly the sun vanished beyond the rim of the world.

"What that down below, Maks?"

"The Great Shield."

He pulled her close and they gazed down, cheek touching cheek, as a river of dull, yellow-green lights rose from the sea and slipped by beneath them. Once the lost city of Baztan, with its endless suburbs, its centers of learning, its eleven million people.

"Oh, *znacho* be so big," she whispered, remembering with an effort the Alspeke word for shield.

"This is only the edge."

Sometimes the lights fused into a broad, fuzzy glow; sometimes little separate spots winked like a galaxy of fireflies. Where the sea had intruded, the shield was a rash of little glowing islands marking forgotten hills and

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highlands. Beyond lay the profound darkness of the continent-wide North American Game Preserve.

"All those people gone," she whispered, lapsing into her native dialect, her voice breaking. "Millions and millions and millions of them."

The river of luminescence broadened. At the same time the glow at the center concentrated, spreading over a peninsula, part of an island, and swatches of mainland — Manhattan. Maks touched the stud and the wall became dark.

"Let's not watch. It's too grim."

"Oh, Maks," she said, "couldn't you save just a few of them? I mean real people, not these characters like Benjo what's-his-name."

"No. It'd cost me my head. I've taken a lot of risks already. And Sherí, we agreed to talk Aispeke until you understand it better."

"Oh *da*, I almost forgotten," she said bitterly.

A chill descended as she turned away from him. Later, when the robot attendant made up their bed, she signaled unmistakably that she was in no mood for sex.

Day was breaking over North America (and Maia, back in Ulanor, was making her sundown call to the Security Forces) when the earthliner coasted to a landing near the ancient town of Vizburkh on a bluff overlooking the eastern shore of the Inland Sea. The morning seemed to have dispersed the touch of frost. Sherí was delighted by the inn, by their room so old-fashioned it had glass windows.

She was laying out clothes and humming to herself when a small robot of antique design knocked and politely informed Maks that he had a call from his headquarters.

"That's what I get for being an executive," he grumbled, but followed it into the hallway. He returned frowning.

"My son's gone missing," he told her.

"You mean he's run away?"

"Probably. Maia's so goddamn hysterical. I called Pali and asked him to have somebody check it out."

"He care for things. He been so nice to me."

They bathed together in a quaint shower. Delighted in the warm rosy touch of her body amid the steam, Maks sank to his knees and kissed her belly just above the tiny lank twist of coppery pubic hair. They laughed

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and grappled like teenagers in the heat of the drying lamp, made love again and again.

Afterward they dressed and breakfasted and strolled on the sun-dappled shores of the Inland Sea. Maks was full of ideas.

"We'll have a real vacation. We'll take the underwater tour of the fish ranches. And a hovercar ride to the High Plains to see the bison herds. And there's a mountain somewhere that's been carved with the faces of ancient gods...."

But that evening the mood darkened. Captain Pali called to say that Sandi hadn't turned up. He added that General Yamashita had ordered Colonel Yost to take charge of the investigation. Yamashita's action also meant Sandi's disappearance must be a kidnapping.

In the small, old-fashioned room, Maks lay on his back and stared at the ceiling, his tension palpable.

"Maks."

"What?"

"Please take a pill and go to sleep." She was talking dialect again.

"I can't. Pali might call."

"Well then, turn over and let me rub your back."

He had just begun to doze off when another knock rattled the room's quaint wooden door. As a result of that message, dawn found them groggily filing into another earthliner for the return flight to the Worldcity, their vacation over almost before it had begun.

"YOU SAID you wanted me," said Maks.

Pali nodded. A thin, dark man of quicksilver moods, he had been Yost's deputy when he headed the time-travel unit; now he was Maks's. He didn't seem to care that Maks's influence with the general had enabled him to jump over his head.

"A message was combed out of cyberspace by one of our arbots. Obviously sent randomly from one public mashina to another on the assumption we'd pick it up. It said, 'If Maks wants to see Sandi he must wait for a message at home.'"

They sat in the Hastings apartment. Sherí sat in a corner smoking kif, her gray eyes distant.

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"In a way," Maks said, "it's a relief to find out Sandi wasn't taken by some maniac who might hurt him for no good reason."

"I quite agree with you, Major."

Suddenly Maks's big mashina chimed and he snapped out, "Say!"

Maia's head appeared, hovering in the shadowbox.

"Maia, the instant I know something definite you'll know it, too," he said irritably.

"Oh, don't hand me that crap. You'll tell me what you think I ought to know when you think I ought to know it."

"Well then, here's something indefinite. We may — or may not — have a message from the kidnapper. If so, he's supposed to contact me here. Now please cut the circuit before I do."

"Oke, I'm going to sign off. But please, Maks — as soon as you know."

To fill the silence that followed, Pali gave a brief account of how the *stari* — the old ones, the people of former times — were faring. They all wanted to start new lives in the here and now; they said they'd paid their ransom and wanted to be free.

"I tell them we've all got to wait for orders. In plain fact I don't know what the Controller wants done with them. I try to keep up their spirits while we milk them for information, but it's not easy."

Maks hardly heard him. "Thanks, Pali. I'll see you tomorrow."

Pali saluted, smiled at Sherí, and left the apartment. Two thuggi and a Darksider waited in the hall outside. The animal displayed its long fangs and scratched its fur in boredom. The thuggi were shooting dice.

"Why does crime flourish in the capital city of the human species?" Pali asked himself with a wry smile. "Just look."

The mashina chiming woke Maks at a little past three. He stared with gummy eyes at a double cone hovering in the shadowbox.

A flat voice, probably an arbot, said, "I want to speak to you entirely alone. Sandi sends greetings."

The message was over but the lasers didn't go off. Instead, the code of the mashina from which the message had been sent floated into the shadowbox. The Security Forces were at work.

Half a minute more, and he was watching a streetcorner scene shot

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from a hovercar in which a dozen polizi rushed a lighted public mashina set in the outer wall of a bank. One reached into the queue with a gloved hand and pulled out a memory cube.

"Delayed transmission, of course," said the cop. "Analysis of the cube will begin at once, Major Hastings."

"Thank you."

They're watching over me, he thought. If only they weren't watching so closely I might be able to contact this guy, as he says, "entirely alone."

Four twenty-five came and went with no further message. Maks checked the bedroom, where Sherí slumbered, thrust an impact pistol into his *meshok* or beltpounch, and at four sixty-five stepped out of his door. The Darksider opened one raspberry-colored eye, but Maks raised a finger, then held up a palm.

Quiet, said the gestures. Wait for me. The animal made no move but watched him hurry down the hallway and step into the lift.

Another minute and he was standing in the lobby. He flashed his ID at the building's security monitor and when it opened the door, hastened into the shadowy street.

At this hour the northwestern suburb slept, locked away behind steel doors and flickering security eyes and silent sensors. The city center with its contradictory clutter of giant public buildings, anonymous apartment blocks, and crowded, lively slums, lay far away to the south. Here everything was quiet. A few hovercars slid by overhead, gravity compensators chugging, but the streets were empty and dead.

Maks walked slowly down the well-swept sidewalk, avoiding the jut of buildings, sometimes stepping into the street of poured stone. Luminous circles set in walkways ten meters overhead cast an arctic glow that alternately gave him many shadows and none at all.

So, he thought. Here I am, alone. Where are you?

He heard a whining, rattling sound behind him and turned. An old trirad lurched into view, the driver's bearded face dimly reflecting the lights from his dashboard. It clattered past and disappeared around the next turning.

So nothing, he thought, and stood uncertainly at the curbside, looking sometimes up the curving street, sometimes at the blank-faced buildings and the third-stage walkways. Maybe, he thought, I should be up there?

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Then he heard, far behind him, a small shrill motor. Maks eased his right hand into his meshok. He stepped back into an angle of a building just as a small black robot of the type used to carry packages rolled into view. One wheel was loose, giving it a wobbling motion. It stopped facing him.

"Major?"

"Yes."

"May I respectfully request that you show me your ID?"

Maks used his left hand to show the ceramic square with its hologram and the robot blinked at it.

"Do you have a message for me?" he asked.

"Indeed, yes."

"Well?"

"Nine ninety-nine Subotai Street at nine."

"That's easy to remember."

"Come absolutely alone. Otherwise — "

Without the slightest warning Sandi began screaming, again and again and again. Maks's heart paused, gave a bound. Then with a sudden cough and flare of blue light the robot disintegrated, scattered tinkling parts over the street.

An instant later Maks heard the old trirad again, whining somewhere up the street in the darkness. He whirled and pursued it around a bend and between a high stone wall and a fence of twisted steel. A dim light appeared and drove straight at him. He pulled his impact pistol and took a two-handed grip and a solid stance, feet a meter apart, prepared to demolish the driver with a shot through the windscreen.

The awkward vehicle squeaked to a halt and the driver jumped into the street, crying out, "Oh, Mister, don't shoot, don't shoot!"

Maks still had the weapon raised when a woman eased out of the trirad's back seat and hurried toward him.

Maia said, "Where is he, Maks? I heard him scream."

Slowly and almost regretfully he lowered the pistol. If he'd ever needed somebody to shoot, it was now.

The thuggi were still snoring when Maks and Maia quietly entered his apartment. They talked in low voices.

"So you still don't trust me," he said.

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"Oh, Maks, I just didn't know what you really knew, what you were really up to. What's been going on?"

He told her what had happened, keeping to himself only the address. She seized on that at once.

"Where are you meeting him? I want to know."

"At a place where you won't be. Or anybody else."

She digested that, then said dully, "It's so strange to sit here, just talking. I died a little when the screaming started."

"I've thought about that," he told her, "and I don't believe that was Sandi. I heard it up close and the sound lacked the overtones of the human voice. The whole thing, the message, the screams — it was all mashina-generated. They probably took a voiceprint of Sandi talking and created the screams from that."

She looked at him, frowning. "You're not just saying that?"

"No."

"Did you see where the robot came from?"

He shrugged. "No. My guess is somebody gave it a recognition code and parked it in a doorway to wait for me."

They looked at each other. Maks's mashina chimed and he turned wearily and told it, "Say."

It was a tech at headquarters. "Major? We've been analyzing that memory cube — you know, the one that sent the message for you?"

"Yes?"

"Well, sir, it's a standard one-cc, thousand-laminate, ten-trillion-byte cube. But it's kind of odd, because it has an electronic signature on it...."

Maks shot one glance at Maia, as much to say, "This may be what we're looking for."

"What kind of signature?"

"Well, sir, it's a Security Forces signature. It's our own issue."

"So, how did she take that?" asked Sherí over breakfast.

Beyond the transplast window, just as in verses by one of Maia's ancient poets, dawn was coming up like thunder out of China. An almost cloudless sky promised a typically hot Siberian summer day.

"Not well," said Maks. "She jumped to the conclusion that Sandi was snatched in some kind of internal polizi intrigue."

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Sherí frowned as if she found such a notion hard to grasp. Maks went on:

"I told her that we buy these cubes by the million. They're not even accountable property. People take them home to use on their own mashini. Anybody can latch onto a polizi cube."

"Oh, well, I'm glad of that."

Why, Maks wondered, did he find Sherí's easy acquiescence as annoying as Maia's skepticism? He continued to talk, arguing now with himself.

"Actually, it's the most probable explanation. But...I have to be sure. I'm going to that meeting, and I'm going alone, and I'm not telling anybody, not Pali, not the General, not anybody. Just in case."

He hesitated, then added: "And Maia's going to help me."

Where another woman was concerned, Sherí's mind worked as well as anybody's. "I don't think I like that."

"There's nothing between her and me and never will be again," Maks told her. "But Sandi's our son and she's going to help me find him."

For an instant their eyes dueled. Then Sherí touched his hand lightly.

"I'm sorry, Maks. I know you're so worried. I'll help you to get what you want, and you'll help me to get what I want. Deal?"

He was too wary to fall for that one, so he said with false warmth, "It's wonderful knowing you're on my side."

Sherí smiled, restored to good humor.

He changed into old clothes. The message had said nothing about weapons, so he took three, one in his beltpouch, one hung in his armpit under a loose-fitting jacket, and the smallest thrust into his right boot. Armed to the teeth, he kissed Sherí and stepped out of his door wondering when or if he'd return to her.

"I want the animal to stay here and watch my place," he told the thuggi as they came to attention. "You two come with me. My ex-wife has some materials that may be useful to the investigation."

At Maia's building, Maks entered at the 16th stage and left the thuggi hovering outside. Maia let him into her apartment, gave him a slip of hardcopy, and told him what she'd learned from her students about the secrets of getting out of the campus compound without using the gates.

"Sounds good," he said, and hesitated.

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"Maks, you don't have much time," she pointed out.

"I'd like to look at Sandi's room before I go."

She nodded quickly and stood in the doorway behind him while he looked at his son's scruffy bed, the clutter of toys — the *futbol*, the plastic atomlasers, the collection of stuffed Darksiders with toy impact weapons in their furry hands.

A hundred other things, some bright, some battered. The boy's paintings hung on the walls among pictures of Maks and Maia that curled at the edges. Maks turned, blinking his eyes, and almost ran into her. He put his arms around her, his face sank into her dark hair and he sniffed the shampoo she'd always used, with its vague lemony scent.

Her body felt almost the same — maybe thinner. He was conscious of her breasts tight against his lower ribs, those breasts he had once seen as lanterns of desire, later as comforting pillows to rest against in bed. Maia had always had a good backside and his right hand, as if guided by its own will, slid down her spine and gently traced the familiar shape of an inverted heart.

It was really embarrassing, he thought — while she was removing the hand that had gone too far — how, after all that had gone wrong between them, he still responded to her touch by getting an erection. Half an erection, anyway.

"It's too bad, isn't it?" she whispered, and he nodded, knowing exactly what she meant.

"Oh, I wish I could go with you," she murmured as he left the apartment. "I know I'd be in the way, I'm afraid of guns — but oh, how I wish I could go with you."

He smiled and gave her a brotherly kiss. "Back soon," he said, and hurried down the hallway to the lift.

He took it all the way down to the cellar. Maia had supplied him an electronic key, which he used to open an external door without setting off its alarm. Trash bins stood in a weedy little courtyard. He slipped through an open gate into the campus grounds and headed for the wall.

Movement detectors watched the top, but down below, in a dank patch of high grass among some stunted pines, shielded by a warped sheet of semiplast he found a hole that he could just crawl through.

He emerged into a clump of coarse brush. A rutted street lay just

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beyond. Maks turned right, walked a hundred meters, and found the trirad parked where Maia had paid the driver to leave it. The slip of hardcopy gave him the lock code; he punched it in and the door popped open.

The vehicle creaked and swayed under his weight. Hard to remember, he thought, how many people in the Worldcity couldn't afford a hovercab and got where they were going either on foot or in such rattletraps as this. He kicked a pedal and the whine of an electric engine started up. He tried the handbrake and shook his head over the steering lever. This thing would have seemed quaint in America 300 years ago. But it moved.

Down a gentle hill and into the noisy traffic of a busy street that emptied into Government of the Universe Place. Maks maneuvered through a couple of near-accidents and turned into a broad avenue that ran beside the Senate of the Worlds. Darksiders were everywhere around the building like huge furry caterpillars. Senators in their purple sashes of office strolled alone or conferred in small conspiratorial groups, just as if they held real power, instead of providing window-dressing for the powerful bureaucrats who ran the world.

A narrow street full of peddlers ran off the avenue and Maks turned into it. *Strat Subotai,* said a battered sign. The street had once been respectable, but nothing remained of that time except a jumble of banal, once-fashionable houses, now mostly cut up into shops and apartments.

A woman came out of a doorway waving at Maks, and he almost stopped before realizing that she wanted to hire his cab. He passed her by and she shook a fist at him.

The numbers on the houses didn't seem to run in order; maybe they'd been numbered according to the order they were built in. Just when he thought he'd have to stop and ask, he saw 999.

He got out and locked the trirad's door behind him. The woman who wanted a cab ran up and began yelling at him.

"*Glupetz!* Didn't you see me wave?" she demanded. "I gotta uncle in the polizi and I'll report you!"

"Stupid your own self. I gotta fare," he said, pointing at the house.

"Like hell you do. That place is empty."

"If there ain't nobody there, I'll take you," he growled and left her standing by the trirad and kicking furiously at the front wheel.

Maks was not surprised to find the door unlocked. It opened

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noiselessly, too, as if somebody had recently squirted the hinges with defrictioner.

The entry hall was dim but not dark. Maks moved on to the atrium with hand on weapon. A dirty skylight shone on an empty pool. Faux Roman had been in style when the place was built; a statue of cast stone viewed him with blind eyes.

Beyond the atrium was a large room, wide as the house, with a built-in circular dining table at knee height. A broken chandelier dangled by a chain. A low humming began and Maks noted that the vacuum vents and electrostatic filters around the baseboards were working, drawing away the dust.

"Welcome," said an atonal voice, making him jump in spite of himself.

Then he understood. Somebody had started the building's automatic systems working — including the intercom. In another room an arbot was preparing to converse. He seated himself on the circular table and waited.

"I bring you greetings from Sandi."

"Let me hear him."

"In just a moment."

The temptation to find and blast the speaker was almost irresistible. Instead, he crossed his legs and waited.

"You may be interested to learn that I am not seeking money," said the voice.

"I see. You want a service performed."

"Precisely. The service is one that would be impossible for anyone else, but should be simple for you, the famous timesurfer."

"I will not send an unauthorized person to the past, no matter what," said Maks, thinking of Dyeva, of Loki, of Zo Lian. The idealistic, the vengeful, the mad, all hoping to destroy the world of the present by altering the past.

"Don't worry. I want you to bring someone from the past to the present — someone who would otherwise die only a few hours afterward. Surely *that's* possible."

Even through the impersonal voice he seemed to hear an overtone of irony. How much, he wondered, does this bastard know?

Maks frowned, uncrossed his legs, crossed them again. He waited a

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few seconds, choosing his words, wishing that he could make his voice as flat as this artificial one.

"Possible, yes. In theory. But who and why?"

"Daddy, I don't like it here."

Maks shivered. It was Sandi's real voice, with the genuine overtones of anxiety, uncertainty, boredom, perhaps fear.

"Please come and get me. I want to go back home now. I don't like it here."

Silence. Maks sighed. Yes, well, I know who's holding all the cards.

"If I can't know why," he said, "I must at least know who."

"An absolutely harmless person, I assure you. A child not unlike your own. One who can't grow up unless you save him. He lives in the city of Washington in 2091."

"The date's right," muttered Maks. Suddenly he felt a dawning sense that a deal might, after all, be possible.

Hit early in the Troubles by a massive thermal cluster — roughly four times the explosive force of the one that hit New York — Washington had been so completely destroyed that robot excavators never had been sent there.

The aim of the Chinese had been to kill America's military and civilian leadership inside their refuge, a massively reinforced tunnel system beneath the city. So far as anybody knew, the attack, a classic of overkill, had achieved its aim. *No one* had survived.

"Unfortunately," the voice went on, "his parents and teachers will not know that your aim is beneficent. You'll have to kidnap him in order to bring him back."

Maks had often heard the phrase "a mirthless smile." That was now his expression as he contemplated the deal he was being offered.

"In short, to regain my son, I must become what you are."

"Say rather that my wish to save a boy's life is not unlike your own."

"I suppose you know that bringing an unauthorized person through the wormholer can cost me my head?"

"I am well aware of the risk."

"And you absolutely refuse to tell me why you want this particular child?"

Silence.

"Very well. Now I'll give you my minimum conditions. I must speak to my son directly, not to a recording, not to a mashina-generated image. I don't want virtual reality in this, I want reality reality."

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"Agreed."

"One more thing. If you injure my son, either now or later, for any reason whatever, I will devote the rest of my life and all the resources of my office to hunting you down. When I find you I will personally direct your shosho and execution and I will watch you die."

Maks had never been able to endure watching a shosho session, but his heart was hardening by the hour.

"Your message is understood."

"When will I hear from you?" Maks asked, rising stiffly to his feet. He was soaked in sweat, as if he'd been running a long race.

"When I choose."

Outside, the neighborhood was as nondescript as ever. The woman who wanted a cab had presumably found one. Unless, he thought wearily, she was the one who planted the memory cube and turned on the intercom. If he called Colonel Yost now, asked for a raid, had the Darksiders tear every one of these houses to pieces, would he find his boy? Of course not.

He climbed into the trirad and kicked the starter. The little motor whined. I ever get through this and Sandi survives, he thought, I can endure anything. Even shosho would be a vacation.

IN MAKS'S ABSENCE Sherí summoned a hovercab and headed a few kilometers to another sector in the northeast quadrant of the city.

As honored guests of the state, the stari that Maks and the other timesurfers had brought back from olden times lived luxuriously in a Security Forces safe house. Around the curving faux Chinese roofs stretched formal gardens enclosed by a high stone wall; nearby stood palaces belonging to senators, monopolists and top bureaucrats, general officers and guildmasters.

Sherí's cab sputtered down, avoiding the dangerous airspace above the compound. She saw the guardpost at the main gate, the kennels lining the street, the Darksider guards lounging around scratching their fur and hefting impact weapons in double-thumbed hands. The cab's arrival caused a dozen big mandrill faces to look up, staring through blue sun visors and displaying long yellow fangs.

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Then they were gone. Landing in a quieter street to the rear of the compound, she paid off the cab's black box and walked to a postern gate no wider than a man. Pali stood there waiting for her.

She wasn't supposed to come here, and she sometimes wondered about Pali's motives in letting her in. Was he just being kind? He seemed like such a nice man! Or, she wondered, does he think he'll benefit in the long run by making a friend of his boss's wife?

Whatever, this was their secret, and they shared a conspiratorial smile as he used an electronic key to shut off the gate's sensors.

"Where's the boss, Madame Major?" he asked as they passed through into the garden.

"Business," she said vaguely. "Poor Maks, he's so terribly worried about his little boy."

Pali shook his head. "I don't really understand it, a thing like that happening in a society as well-policed as ours. Do you want to go direct to the teahouse?"

"I think I'll say hello to some of the others, too."

"Fine. I like it when you come and visit. You're good for their morale."

While he returned to his duties she spoke to three or four of the stari who were strolling the garden. Most of them she liked — a darkly handsome orthodox Jew from Manhattan's diamond center, a Tiffany-Cartier executive, a woman curator from the Met. She avoided a tall, imperious woman who seemed to think she still owned a billion shares of the Dotcom Cartel even though it had vanished in a cloud of smoke three centuries ago.

Sherí crossed a curving wooden bridge and made her way by a path soft with emerald moss through a stand of giant bamboo. A little artificial waterfall murmured and chuckled, and beside it stood a plain small wooden house with shoji screens instead of windows and doors.

Inside, Benjo Kurosawa rose and put out his hands and smiled. Then he sat down crosslegged on a kapok cushion and gestured for her to do the same. She folded her legs and sat gracefully, noting with a thrill how his eyes followed her movements. A little robot entered and began to prepare tea.

She couldn't help smiling at the contrasts — a man of Twenty-first-Century New York wearing an Armani suit to an ancient tea ceremony taking place in the remote future.

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"Right," he nodded. "All times and places meet here."

She laughed delightedly. "You're a real mind reader!"

He seemed to enjoy her naiveté. "Tell me about your adventures outside the wall, Sherí."

"It's not all gravy. The language is dreadfully hard and, frankly, I'm scared all the time. Benjo, are there *kloppi* — sorry, bugs — in this place?"

"No. Take it from me. I've searched it myself."

"It's just that I'm always so worried about being discovered."

"It must be tough. Yet, Jesus! How I envy you."

"Oh, I know. It's so, so deluxe here, isn't it? But it's still a prison anyway."

He sighed. "Don't remind me. Whenever I can, I come out here by myself and think about the long ago and the far away.... You remember them building the Fifth-Level Highway?"

"Sure. I was living with Mama in a building near Rockefeller University and the hospital center. The noise kept us awake for two whole years. What it did to the patients I can't imagine."

"Well, I built it," he said. "That was when I was still getting my hands dirty by making things instead of just making money. In those days Channel 350 called me the Japanese-American Robert Moses."

"Oh yes?" she said vaguely. "Who was he, some Israeli?"

Benjo smiled. Often in the past he'd met dim minds housed in magnificent bodies.

"Tell me about this Maks of yours," he said, changing the subject. "How'd you meet him?"

"Well, it started so simply. I had a fling with this good-looking, rather odd man I'd met romantically by running head-on into him on 57th Street. He had a funny accent, and his underwear! I'd never seen anything like it. But he was sexy and had, obviously, a big secret and that fascinated me, trying to get it out of him. Then one day he asked me if I'd like to visit his home, and I said yes, and he said, well, let's have a drink first. When I woke up here, I thought I'd gone crazy."

Benjo nodded. "I know how you felt. How'd Maks explain it to you?"

"He told me about the Time of Troubles that was coming in 2091, how the Russian Defense Minister would launch an attack on China and

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the Chinese would hit Russia and all its allies, and so on. I'd never paid any attention to politics, and at first I didn't believe him."

"Took me a while to believe it too," he assured her.

"See, you do know how I feel. Oh, I'm so glad I met you, Benjo. And the others, too. When I heard you were here, I simply couldn't stay away."

His eyes probed her. She wondered if he was reading her mind and the thought made her uneasy. She didn't want him to know how much he fascinated her.

"You're a good friend," he said and touched her hand, gently. "So please, Sherí. Do me a favor. Try to persuade Maks to get us released. I want to have a life again, a real life."

"I've promised you and I will. I want Maks to bring Mama here. I just can't think of her dying in some dumb war. I want him to set you and all the stari free, too, and I'm going to get everything I want, sooner or later. I can be pretty persuasive."

"Oh, I bet you can, Sherí. I've never met a woman like you."

How proud it made her feel to have this fascinating man say that to her! She raised a cup of the hot, fresh-brewed tea to her mouth and thought suddenly how like a magician Benjo looked, with wraiths of steam rising like incense around him.

MAKS RETURNED as he'd come, telling Maia that a deal might be possible, picking up his escort — the thuggi grinned at him, pretty sure in their own minds why he'd been so long in his ex-wife's apartment — and at last heading home.

Sherí had just gotten back. She listened to his adventures, his hopes of a deal, then began to talk up her own projects. But he merely growled, "Not now," and headed out to his office. That evening he worked late, trying to catch up, and she had gone to bed when he returned.

Maks looked in on her, wondered briefly how this sleeping goddess could irritate him so much, and then settled down with a sheaf of hardcopy from his office.

The mashina showed no calls for him since the morning. "When I choose," echoed through his mind, with the accent on "when." He was sharply aware of the clock on the wall. When it said, "Twenty-four,

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Honored Major...Oh-oh-oh one. A new day is beginning," he gave up all pretense of work and sat smoking while its advancing numbers glowed and faded with the passing minutes.

At oh-one-oh-oh he called Maia long enough to tell her that nothing more had happened.

"I think I'm getting tougher," she whispered. "You know, I didn't even try to follow you today."

She sounded strained and tired and clearly hadn't been sleeping. But she was in control of herself. Maks cut the connection, wondering if evolution had equipped women better than men for waiting. Over the eons, they'd had to do so much of it.

Not wishing to disturb Sherí, he made himself a nest of cushions on the floor, pulled the censer close, and settled down to wait. He must have fallen asleep again, when in a dream a mashina chimed. First in the dream, and then in real life, he said, "Say."

The double cone was shimmering again, the kidnapper's logo. What did it mean? he wondered. Then Sandi appeared and he forgot everything else.

The boy was sitting on an unmade bed, rubbing his eyes. Looking reedy but no more so than usual; dark hair uncombed, with the widow's peak and the small shaved spot at the crown that all the kids were wearing. Suddenly he gasped, staring at an image of his father.

"Son, it's me. Are you all right?"

"Uh huh. Are you coming to get me?"

"As soon as I can."

There was a very brief time lapse between question and answer.

"I don't like these guys."

"Have they hurt you?"

"N-no. Grila won't let them. I just don't like them."

Suddenly Sandi was in a mood to issue orders.

"Daddy, I want you to come here and get me *right now*."

When Maks said he couldn't, Sandi started to cry and then to rage. Maks didn't care. He was talking to the real Sandi, that was the main thing, and the boy, though he was tired, scared and having a tantrum from sheer frustration, seemed to be unharmed.

Suddenly the communication ended. Another instant and a hand-held

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vicor was showing him a shoddy room with a mashina standing on a table by a window.

A polizi tech walked in front of the vicor, rapped the mashina with his knuckles, and stared out the window. Then he turned and said, "Sir?"

"Yes?"

"Message originated somewhere in those tall buildings out there. Probably sent here by laser. Connected with a transceiver attached to this set that converted the information impressed on the beam into a mashina image that was rebroadcast to you."

Sighing, Maks cut the circuit. He called Maia, told her the story, asked her not to cry. When she did anyway, he cried with her. It was his first breakdown since the ordeal began, and Maia seemed to like the proof he cared.

The sounds had waked Sherí. She made him tea, spoke quietly and sensibly while they waited.

"Have you checked out this 'Grila'?" she asked. She made no effort to talk Alspeke; they chatted in Archaic English.

"Sure. The techs ran it through Files. There's an old farmer living in Karakorum whose name is Grila Simyon. He's a hundred-and-one and has no living descendants. It's probably a nickname or an alias for one of the kidnappers."

The message traffic continued. The polizi were searching the buildings where the broadcast might have originated. No hope of finding Sandi, of course — he'd undoubtedly been spirited away. But they wanted to find the room in hopes of coming upon physical evidence left by the criminal.

In fact, they would need two more days of patient legwork to find in a ninety-stage apartment block the room where Sandi had sat on a rumpled bed talking to his father through a mashina. Almost at once a disturbing new pattern began to develop in the investigation.

The mashina was there, the bed was there, the laser communicator was gone, Sandi was gone. The owner of the flat was gone too — a hydroponics expert giving guidance on growing lettuces and carrots in the tunnels of Ganymede — and thus not a factor in the drama.

Polizi robots proceeded to vacuum the entire flat and carried off the dust in sealed and labeled bags. The bed, the sheets, the mashina followed

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to the laboratories of the Security Forces under the Palace of Justice. But the dust proved to be the most important gleaning.

In the lab a filter-separator began pulling out fibers, dust mites, bits of nail paring, coiled pubic hairs, flakes of dandruff, fallen eyelashes, navel fuzz, and similar detritus and parading 3D images through a mashina. Two techs of the sort that gun-toting polizi called "white mice" examined the images as they floated by.

"That hair's probably from a kid," commented the head mouse. "Too fine for an adult."

"Mark for examination," said the assistant mouse to the mashina. Then both gasped. What looked like an anaconda was writhing past.

"Oh, Great Tao," said the head mouse. "Rotate."

The image paused, rotated on various axes. When the head mouse ordered enlargement, the microscope zoomed in on curiously long, coarse cells that were almost big enough to be seen by the naked eye.

He looked at his assistant. The assistant looked at him.

"Was there a Darksider in the task force that entered the apartment?" asked the assistant.

"No," said the mashina, after a few seconds. "Humans only."

"Well," said the assistant, "Maybe a hair adhered to somebody — "

"Look," said his chief. "This hair was entangled in stuff from under the bed. It was there for a while. I mean, it's like hunting dinosaurs. You find a bone embedded in a Cretaceous stratum, it wasn't dropped yesterday."

The head mouse ordered the anaconda separated and marked. Then he called the Chief of Research. She was deep in a saliva sample and answered the call in no good humor.

"Well? Well?"

The head mouse told her what they'd found. Almost a minute of absolute silence followed.

"I'm coming down," she said at last. "If you're right, bonuses for both of you. If you're wrong, kiss your asses good-bye."

The mice grinned at each other. They knew they were right. One of the kidnappers was a Darksider and they, of course, served only the agencies of government.

Yamashita had ordered Yost to report to him personally on the kidnapping, and the deputy did so every day.

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"So you don't think it was *mafya*," said the General.

"No. We've made arrests, of course, run a dozen suspects through Special Investigations. Two died, so I don't think they were lying. Nobody in the city's heard a whisper."

"Get any names from the *kukrachi*?"

The word meant cockroaches — slang for common criminals.

"Yes, but they led nowhere. You know, when the needles are in somebody's spine, they start naming people. Any people, innocent or guilty. It's regrettable, but it happens."

Yost sighed over this evidence of human weakness. Yamashita frowned.

"Something's obviously bothering you. What?"

"A report — a rather disturbing report — has just come in from the laboratory."

He outlined the finding made that morning by the white mice. Yamashita for once was too startled to fly into a rage.

"What? What? They've got a Darksider?"

"So it seems. The possibility has to be faced that one or more of our own people are somehow involved in this."

"Why would a cop get involved in a kidnapping?"

Yost shrugged. "I don't know. It's distressing to think of such a thing. I hope there's some kind of mistake. But it does give us another line of investigation to follow."

"What?"

For answer, Yost took from his beltpouch a plastic envelope containing what looked like powder, but was in fact tiny spheres of dull metal.

"Micromonitors," he said.

"I'm familiar with the devices. In the penal colonies we insert them along with explosive neurotoxin pellets for improved control over the inmates. So what?"

"Well, I'm only concerned with the monitors. My point is, they've been so miniaturized that they can be inserted by a hypodermic gun along with an aerosol serum. Then instead of forming a little lump under the scalp that somebody can find and remove, they circulate through the body with the bloodstream. If you approve, I'll order booster shots for everybody in the organization, human and animal. The mainframe mashina will

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track the monitors, and if anybody turns up where they're not authorized to be — "

"Good!" roared Yamashita, recovering his usual temper. "I like anything that improves top-down control! Do it!"

"Would you like to take the first shot," asked Yost politely, "or shall I?"

By this time another report was percolating upward toward Yost's desk. It was even more — in his word — distressing.

A private citizen reported to the polizi that sounds were coming from the supposedly empty apartment next to his own. Among the voices was that of a child.

The report was routed through various mashini and eventually landed on the desk of a sergeant named Blin, who decided it was one more false lead. Even so, she ordered a pair of thuggi to check it out on their way back to barracks from an interdepartmental *futbol* game.

The thuggi approached the door in a blank gray hallway on the nineteenth stage of another residential block. Then they paused, sniffed, and looked at each other. One mouthed the word, "Darksider," and the other nodded. They beat a hasty retreat.

Their report brought Sergeant Blin, six more thuggi and two Darksiders, all armed with impact weapons, while a guncar nosed up to the exterior of the suspect apartment. Blin, almost spherical, 1.6 meters tall and 80 kilos heavy, rolled into the hallway hefting a pistol half as long as she was wide. She had a round face, small round dark eyes, and a cap of short gray hair. She took all crimes against children personally, and she was absolutely fearless.

"Is that the door?" she whispered.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Darksiders forward, one to each side. Right. Now stand back and *yell*, goddammit, all of you!"

"POLIZI! *Tor otkrit!*"

Impact slugs blasted through the door from inside and shattered the wall opposite. Suddenly the hallway was dim with dust and floating fragments like the dark spots that drift before the eyes after a blow to the head.

Blin's Darksiders poked their own weapons into the holes and fired

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into the apartment. Sounds of explosion, disintegration and collapse followed. Then they smashed in what was left of the door and the thuggi followed, roaring.

They found nothing. Blin led the way through a ruined parlor and into a bedroom. The window had been broken out; a hovercar lifted out of view just as she reached the shattered duroplast and stared out.

Blin was not the brightest star of the Security Forces but she knew why a polizi guncar that hovered a hundred meters away wasn't firing at the fugitives. The escaping car was broadcasting a signature key that automatically immobilized all polizi automatic weapons and missiles.

Blin turned back, stunned, to face her gaping subordinates. The kidnappers were escaping in a polizi car.

MAKS, KNOWING nothing of these developments, went through the next few days like an automaton. That was the style of the Security Forces: nobody ever told you anything unless you absolutely had to know it to do your job. In this organization, paranoia equaled policy.

He went to his job at Pastplor, the Office for the Exploration of the Past, dealt with ordinary things, disciplinary hearings, efficiency ratings, budget numbers. He sent young timesurfers to the past and collated their reports. At one point he was called to the nearest dispensary to get a booster shot, baring his right arm amid a crowd of other grumbling officers.

On this afternoon he sat in his office listening to the clock announce the passage of time. He tried to work on his budget for next year, but even with his mashina doing the math he somehow managed to get every number wrong. Finally he gave up and stared at a clock that stared back at him. Thirteen-seventy-five. Every second was a minute long.

He called home but Sherí was out. Her image politely informed him that she had gone shopping. He had a flash of rage at her, then drank some tea and tried to settle down.

He called Maia, but she looked so stricken when he said he still had nothing to report that he was sorry he'd disturbed her. He was sitting, brooding, disconsolate, when an alarm light on his mashina warned him that his secretary arbot judged a message to be urgent.

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"Say," he muttered, hoarsely.

"Your Honored Wife is at Barrier One and wishes to be admitted."

"Let her in."

Ten minutes later the door to his office slid open and Sherí rushed in, breathless. Maks had long ago warned her never to speak English in headquarters, and her words tumbled out in a torrent of confused Alspeke.

"Oh Maks, I goed by Fresher Market to buying plums, and a man handing out slips of hardcopy — you know how they doing — "

For a moment he thought she had gone mad.

"I thought somebody announcing a special on fat ducks or something, and I doesn't" — she gave up on Alspeke, disregarding all his warnings — "didn't pay him the slightest attention and I almost threw the paper away."

"Sherí — "

"It has instructions on it, Maks. For you. And a little picture a couple of inches — I mean five centimeters — square."

"One second."

To his mashina he said, "You will institute a complete information blackout of this office until further notice. You will record nothing yourself. You will allow no one to enter. Normal conditions will resume in ten minutes."

"Yes, Honored Major."

He leaned toward Sherí. "Read it to me."

"'John Hammer, aged twelve, Venerable Bede Cathedral School. Tell him his father wants him back.'"

He was writing it down when he heard her say, "Oh, my God."

"I wish you'd stop saying that," he said automatically. "Not many people believe in God anymore. Someday you're going to give yourself away."

When he raised his eyes she was staring transfixed at the note. "This is the ransom?"

"Yes."

"Why does the kidnapper want this boy?"

"I don't have the slightest idea."

"Where's this school?"

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"Washington."

"And the time?"

"Autumn, 2091."

"Just before — "

"Yes."

"And you're going back to get him?"

"Yes."

She sat absolutely still for a moment, then said, "I thought you wouldn't save anybody else."

"This is my son we're talking about."

"What about my mother? You said no, you wouldn't go back for her. Why is your son different from somebody I love?"

Maks just stared at her. For the life of him, he couldn't think of a logical reason why Sandi was different. He took refuge in getting angry.

"Goddammit, Sherí, I saved your life! I invented a background for you and embedded it in the official files. I taught you how to live in this world. I tried to teach you the language, without much success I admit. I don't owe you any apologies."

"Yes, I owe you my life, that's true, and thank you so much for reminding me."

"Honored major," said the mashina, "the ten minutes are up. You are again in contact with the world."

It was a bad parting. Sherí walked out, face white with anger. Not until she was seated in a hovercab leaving the Palace of Justice did she remember the danger Maks would soon be facing.

My God, she thought, suppose Maks dies in Washington? What'll happen to me? What'll happen to Mama and Benjo and all of us with him gone?

She almost ordered the black box to take the cab back where she'd come from. Then realized that Maks would be gone before she could reach his office.

"Oh, hell," she muttered.

"I beg pardon, Honored Passenger?" asked the black box. "Do you still wish me to take you to your home?"

"No," she said on impulse. "Taking me — take me to Imperial Mansions Sector, northeast quadrant."

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The cab banked and began a slow turn. Of all the people in this strange world, the only one she could turn to for advice and comfort was Benjo Kurosawa.

How many, many times, thought Maks, lying inside the wormholer, he'd waited here with shielded eyes.

He'd grown so expert in using the device that he no longer needed technicians to aid him; he simply gave the controlling mashina its orders plus a five-minute time delay, and went. That was fortunate, considering the number of illegal things he'd done with the wormholer.

He tensed, felt the instantaneous flash of energy, the sudden supernal cold, then the ordinary brisk windy chill of an ancient autumn day.

He sat up among trees fluttering the red and gold flags of mid-November. This hillside in Rock Creek Park was a favorite "landing site" for the timesurfers, close to everything yet shielded from view.

Maks stood up shakily, then almost fell down again. The body of a murdered woman was lying face-down a couple of meters away. Her blood-dabbled red hair reminded him of Sherí. Averting his eyes, he hastened past the corpse and strode downhill, in a hurry to get away.

Little electric cars were scuttling along the parkway. He paused a last time to be sure he was properly dressed, then crossed a graceful pedestrian bridge and paused by a jogging trail to let a group of runners go past. Their guards, trotting at the rear with Biretta machine pistols slung casually across their shoulders, eyed him narrowly but did not stop.

Maks breathed easier; he always felt better after he'd passed his first inspection from the stari.

Just beyond the park was a burned-out neighborhood. The ruins were nearly four years old and did not smell any longer. It was early morning and peddlers were putting out small stocks of rubbishy goods in stalls built of waste lumber and plastic.

They reminded Maks of the Worldcity's people, a little darker on average than the prosperous folks downtown, with a predominant type that was not unattractive, pale chocolate skin, large dark or greenish eyes, and black or red hair. They shouted cheerfully at one another in the dialect of the neighborhood, which Maks could barely understand.

He hastened on, his shadow fleeting before him. An ancient bus

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burning something that smelled like charcoal was marked CATHEDRAL. He swung aboard, paid 120 dollars, and sat down by an open window.

Time was, he thought as the bus labored up Massachusetts Avenue, when this must have been a row of palatial homes. The baronial buildings were warrens of apartments now, and kids were climbing the old cornices like monkeys and swinging from the carved pilasters on dares.

In sight of the Cathedral, he jumped off the bus. It had reached the end of its run anyway; steel gates closed off the rest of the avenue and guards lounged inside, chatting to their handphones. A steady stream of poorly dressed people passed through the gates, pausing to show their IDs and be patted down — servants, headed for work.

Maks joined the line, showed his fake ID, stated that he worked at one of the big co-ops on Wisconsin Avenue. When they patted him down, they found the wormholer control. At the same instant Maks realized that in the excitement he had forgotten to personalize the chip in the control — it would respond to anyone.

A guard stood fondling it for a moment, almost touching the activating stud.

"What the fuck is this thing?"

"It's a handceiver for the building's intercom. They just installed a whole new system. It never works right."

The guard's index finger passed a millimeter from the bump that would have projected him three centuries into the future and stranded Maks in Washington.

"They never do, do they?" he said and handed it back. Maks moved on, a little stream of cold sweat coursing down his spine. In his pocket, he fingered the familiar controls until the gadget had memorized the unique pattern of micro-bloodvessels in his thumb. Then, breathing easier, he lengthened his stride.

The Cathedral, fake Gothic and less than 200 years old, did not interest him and he hastened past it. Venerable Bede was new-old: reinforced concrete buildings with precast columns, architraves, plinths, caryatids, and whatnot glued on the outside to simulate age.

He paused at a wrought-iron gate in a mossy gray wall and peered inside. Beyond the school buildings stretched bright green playing fields where boys dashed about, kicking a white and black ball. Wire sensors of

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a crude sort ran along the top of the wall, gracefully concealed in masses of English ivy. A couple of big-bellied thuggi stood chatting by a building marked LIBRARY in ornate lettering. They wore heavy pistols, and probably, Maks reflected, had received special training in protecting their charges from kidnappers.

Sighing, he concentrated on his memorized image of young John Hammer. A thin face, hollow-cheeked, with a shock of black hair and a hard, wary alertness about the round, dark eyes. But no child in sight resembled him. Maks moved on, glad that the avenue was bustling this time of the morning with streams of the little electric cars whining south to Georgetown or north to the National Medical Complex that had swallowed Bethesda.

Now, he thought. How exactly do I go about stealing this boy?

"TELL YOU frankly, Sherí, I based my whole financial career on the infinite corruptibility of men. And, of course, women. The sexes are absolutely equal in that respect."

Sherí smiled. The odor of perfectly brewed tea, the rustle of wind in the bamboo outside, the sound of unseen water tumbling over rocks. Yes, this was what she needed.

Benjo, well aware that she was troubled, was saying outrageous things in the brisk nasal accent of New York, which brought back — oh, so much. A whole world.

But his basic sadness soon overtook him. "You know, honey, I never thought *everything* I did would disappear."

She nodded. "I know."

That was the point of their friendship, wasn't it? She did know.

She asked, "Did you have family, Benjo?"

"Yes. Four wives, four divorces. One child."

"Boy or girl?"

"Boy. His mother took him away from me when we split. She was really bitter, maybe with reason. I'd played around a lot, I admit. She remarried and got a tame judge to change my son's name. I was furious when I heard about it. Even had his eyes operated on so they didn't look oriental! Anything to erase me from his life."

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Sherí frowned. "I seem to remember something in *Cybertattle* about it. She married — what was his name — a feelie star, was it?"

"No, an industrialist. Very rich man, from a famous family. His name was Hammer."

A long moment passed and Benjo looked at her curiously. She dropped her eyes, muttering, "I see."

"Ah," he said. "You have a bad effect on me. I've said too much."

"How could you?" she whispered.

She wasn't quite sure what she meant by that — was she asking him how he could betray Maks, and in such an awful way? Or was she asking him how, a prisoner himself, he'd managed this extraordinary crime?

Naturally, Benjo assumed she was asking him how, not why, he'd done it.

"It wasn't hard," he said, refilling both cups. "Policemen are just as crooked today as they were in our time."

He smiled a little, his eyes distant.

"I know you think I'm totally amoral, Sherí, but that's not true. I've got a sense of justice. It amused me to arrange the kidnapping of the son of the man who kidnapped me. And later force him to take my son as I'd taken his."

"Maks saved your life!"

"Oh, honey. Spare me. He brought me here as a living treasure map, nothing else. Drink your tea. It'll get cold."

He sipped his own. "You want to know how I managed it when I'm a prisoner? The answer is bribery. I've given some useful information to the government about hidden treasures. But I know so much more. Nobody in history ever had the means of bribery that I do.

"Think of all the wealth going into the public treasury, which really means into the hands of this old woman, Xian, and her favorites and those dumb senators. Nothing left for the poor policemen! A river of wealth passes through their hands, and though very thirsty they're forbidden to drink. No wonder they become sadists. They've a lot to be sadistic about."

She whispered, "The little boy, Sandi. Is he all right?"

"Of course he is. When you're playing chess and you capture your opponent's pawn, you don't destroy it. You merely take it off the board."

"And the polizi helped you do this."

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"A few of them, yes. A small, well-organized group within the Security Forces. See, honey, what I want is simple. And stop frowning, it's not criminal, not basically. I want to be set free to live in this time, to regain my son and reestablish my family. That's all."

He seemed to be pleading with her for understanding, and suddenly Sherí saw, under the ruthless conniver, a man who wanted very much what she wanted herself. He read her expression and pressed his advantage.

"And I want to marry, this time for the last time. Can you guess the name of the bride?"

She stared at him. She'd never been good at guessing games, not since she was a little girl and the kids at Rudolph Giuliani Elementary School No. 1 used to call her Dim Bulb.

"The bride?" she asked, baffled.

He smiled. "Think about it. Your life is in my hands, because I know you're here illegally. My life and my son's life are in yours. We three can truly understand one another; this Maks of yours can never be anything but a stranger to you, and the better you get to know him the more alien he'll seem. Once I'm free, you and I and John can be happy together. Unless I've lost my touch, and I don't think I have, we can be grandees in this world just as I was in the old one.

"Now, to quote a very old 2-D movie: Have I made you an offer you can't refuse?"

Sandi hated the new room where they'd put him even more than the others. It was like a jail, a light in the ceiling, green walls and a drain in the floor. A box in the corner held a chemical toilet smelling of disinfectant.

True, he'd been given books to read, dinosaur books, books that showed the Pleistocene mammals and the African animals and the North American animals and so forth. The food wasn't too bad — better than at school, anyway. But he was desperately lonely and nobody except Grila seemed to understand that. And today Grila was late.

Sandi missed him. Of course Grila couldn't talk, but he stared fascinated at the pictures in the books, and Sandi read to him, never knowing how much he understood or whether he understood anything at all.

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On this particular day, even emptier than the others, so empty that Sandi would almost have preferred doing lessons, he was sitting in a hard duroplast chair reading, when suddenly Grila's coming announced itself as a faint whiff of nose-wrinkling scent. The door clicked a few times as it always did when somebody was punching in the code, then swung open and Grila came in carrying a bunch of grapes for him.

"Thanks," he said, and ate them while his friend sat down on the floor and looked at him in his quiet, undemanding way, not waiting for anything in particular, just waiting. He had a vet's tag clipped to one ear certifying that he'd received a booster shot. So that was why he was late.

"The grapes were good," said Sandi. "Look, Grila. Come here."

Grila just looked at him until Sandi gestured and then he hunched himself along the floor, not bothering to rise, until he was next to the chair.

"Don't they make you take baths?" asked Sandi, holding his nose. Grila just looked at him, and Sandi reflected that he'd been without a bath so long himself that possibly he smelled as bad to Grila as Grila did to him.

"I guess we're just a couple of stinkers," he smiled and scratched his friend's head. Then he opened the book he'd been reading and pointed to a picture of a huge furry beast that was labeled in large clear print, *Gurila afrikana*.

"See?" said Sandi as Grila touched the page with a sausage-thick hairy finger and scratched at the picture with two centimeters of yellow talon. The beast's extra arms reached for the book and helped to smooth it out on the boy's lap.

"That's where I got your name from," he told it. "You're Grila the Gurila, see?"

Great raspberry-colored eyes, too intelligent for an animal, not quite equal to the human, looked from the picture to Sandi and back again. The jaws opened, showing splayed fangs and a throat like a chasm. A burst of fetid breath emerged but no sound except the rush of air.

Sandi covered his nose and said reprovingly to his friend, "Don't they make you brush your teeth?"

Leaving the teahouse, Sherí staggered as if a heavy weight was tied to her back.

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The secret she knew seemed about to make her head explode. Pali spoke to her as he was letting her out of the gate, but she didn't know what she answered.

At a nearby pylon she called a cab, climbed in, and soared above the neat geometrical quarter of walls, palaces and gardens. Sherí looked down, feeling like a passenger in a little boat tossed around by a storm.

At one moment she hated Benjo for his betrayal of Maks, at the next she hated Maks for refusing to do something so decent, so simple for him, as to save a few more lives from the Troubles — refusing, that is, until someone threatened his own flesh and blood.

Then it was different. Oh yes, then it was different. She thought of her mother vanishing in the firestorm, her atoms dispersed and buried inside the Great Shield. The marrow of Sherí's bones seemed to ache with grief. Benjo was a crook but at least she could understand him, his needs, his yearning to recreate the core of his own life or die trying.

With the force almost of hallucination her mother's face rose before her. So many could be saved, a kind of Underground Railroad across time could be established, and Maks with his power as head of Pastplor — Maks was the key.... And what he wouldn't do willingly, perhaps he could be forced to do.

Benjo had discovered that. He was a compeller, not a persuader.

Suddenly she leaned forward and almost shouted at the black box, "Take me back!"

Sherí hardly noticed the landing. She called Pali from an intercom at the main gate, trying to hold her breath against the smell of the Darksiders. One approached her, curious and wary by its body language, like a dog meeting a visitor. She could see her white face reflected in its blue eyeshield.

Then Pali appeared, smiling his courteous smile, his large dark eyes moist. He put out a slender hand and took hers.

"Ah, Madame Major. I didn't expect to see you again today."

"I'm afraid I may have left my — ". What? she wondered, groping for a lie she'd failed to prepare in advance. "My commdisk. With Benjo. He wanted to know how it works," she babbled, quite aware that Pali was aware that she had no idea how a commdisk worked.

But he said only, "I think he's still out there. Will you excuse me,

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Madame Major? I'm sure — after so many visits — you can find your own way."

Even in her mixed-up emotional state she caught something in his tone. Irony? She'd always resented people being ironic because it usually went right over her head. She tried to read his face but his expression was mild and bland and somehow sweet, like that of a chocolate rabbit.

The teahouse stood as before, a graceful small structure deliberately contrived to echo another time. The stream dashed and chuckled over round stones and a breeze stirred the stalks of giant bamboo and made them rattle gently.

Inside, Benjo rose, gripped her hands and kissed her for the first time. There was nothing tentative about it; his kiss was insistent and deep.

"I knew you'd come back," he told her.

"Oh," she whispered, clutching at the lapels of his elegant suit. She really needed something to hang onto.

"Benjo, I want to — to discuss what you said — "

But he didn't seem to be in the mood for discussion. He hugged her and she was surprised by his strength. He was as strong as Maks and more demanding. He kissed her deeply again and her knees seemed to give way beneath her.

They sank to the floor holding each other. She couldn't decide whether to push him away or pull him close. But he was deciding for her, grappling with her more like a wrestler than a lover, using his mouth to seize her lips, then her throat.

His hands stripped her with ruthless efficiency. Oh Christ, she thought as he pressed her knees back against her breasts, is this how the Samurai did it? The floor felt gritty under her bare bottom. She clutched at his head, bit his ear, tasted blood. Then she screamed.

Nothing made any difference. He had no patience, gave her no time, did not care whether she felt pleasure or pain. His semen jetted inside her like molten wax.

When it was over he stood up, gazed at his stained, limp trousers and shook his head ruefully. The rapist subsided; the debonair businessman reemerged. He even apologized.

"Sorry, honey. It's been a long time. I didn't mean to be so abrupt."

"*Abrupt*," she sobbed. "You're a goddamn animal. I'm bleeding."

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"Let me see. Oh, that's nothing. You're hardly the Virgin Mary."

"You bastard."

She started to cry. He knelt, embraced her, comforted her.

"Sherí, try to forgive. Honey? Come on. I just wanted you too much, that's all. Share my life with me. Make me a better man than I've ever been before."

How many idiots have you used that line on? she wondered. Yet when he began kissing her, she resisted a little, then kissed him back. When he pulled her close, however, she shivered and tried to get away.

But this time he was kind, gentle, almost submissive. The bamboo shadows lengthened as they enjoyed a slow, sweet lovemaking. She whispered her commands, and to her amazement he obeyed; he seemed to stay hard forever, and a hot expanding sun rose and set inside her, rose and set. When it was over her body was humming with violin-like overtones of sorrowful joy.

They left the teahouse arm in arm, walking down the little crooked path of emerald moss beside the bright water. Like young lovers they hardly watched where they were going, looking into each other's faces, trying to read their futures there.

"If only I could've found you long ago," he murmured. His voice was husky, dark. "I'd have showed you a life you can't imagine, Sherí. Now we'll have to start from scratch, build it from the ground up in this strange place, because our own world's gone. Together we can do it."

And somehow, even though her mind screamed warnings, her feelings swooned into belief that Benjo could accomplish anything, anything he wanted to do.

MAKS HAD DELIVERED a package to the school, making no effort to see John Hammer, remembering not to call him Hammer John.

The package was from a shop he'd discovered down the avenue among a cluster of expensive little stores. He'd selected a garment woven of wool, a natural fabric with a texture he'd never felt before. According to the sign, it was designed to make people sweat, though why they should want to Maks couldn't imagine.

The clerk told him that all the boys at Ven Bede's wore them, and

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showed him how the garment was decorated with an embroidered shield showing the Latin word VERITAS, meaning truth.

Then to a shop that sold creamy paper for writing, and pens that bled either wet or dry ink, whichever you desired. Maks inserted a note into the box with the sweater and rewrapped the gift as neatly as he could, sitting on a rustic bench under a rustling golden tree.

"Who's Hammer?" asked one of the fat guards when he handed it through the iron bars of the gate.

"One of your kids, I guess," said Maks in his best idiomatic English. "All I know is, some lady came into the store, bought it, and asked me to hand-deliver it. I gotta get back to work, so here it is."

Now the waiting began.

Maks ate lunch, stared into shop windows, bought a book of psychic predictions whose theme was that the next century would be incomparably better than this one. Smiling sadly, he tucked the book into a metal basket labeled LITTER.

He sat on the rustic bench and watched the traffic flow in bright primary colors along the avenue until his watch said two, meaning fourteen. Then, in the distance, he saw a white-trousered leg thrown over the gray wall of Ven Bede's, followed by a hand, a rumpled blue coat and a tousled dark head.

The boy dropped to the sidewalk and merged into a stream of pedestrians. When he reached a point across from Maks he paused and squinted at the strange man sitting quietly on the bench and waiting for him. The boy looked this way, that way. Maks understood that he was telling himself: Nothing can happen to me with all these people around.

Maks quietly took the wormholer control from his pocket and mimed listening to it, as if it was a handceiver. When he looked up again the boy was standing on the curb on his side of the avenue and staring at him.

"Are you the guy — "

"Yes," said Maks. "Your father sent me to get you."

"You're a liar. He hates my guts."

The eyes were black and ice cold.

"Is that what you've been told?"

"Yes," said John. "Mama says it and for once she's telling the truth. He's all over the tivi. He's rich. He could come and get me if he wanted to."

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Briefly Maks racked his brain for someone named Hammer who might somehow be entangled with the kidnapping. He could think of nobody.

"Well, he wants to now."

He raised the control.

"You can talk to him through this. Christ, John, I don't expect you to believe *me*. Come talk to your father. I won't listen in. I'll cross the street if you want me to. It'll be totally private."

John edged closer. "Who are you, anyway?"

"A private detective. He hired me to contact you. Come on, ask him. Stop talking to me, I can't tell you anything more anyway."

John's eyes were glued to the control. "I never saw a handceiver like that," he muttered.

"It's a new model. Nobody but detectives are allowed to own them."

Clearly, that was a big attraction.

"Reach it to me," the boy said cautiously. "I got to be careful. Lots of rich kids go to that school and one of 'em got snatched last month. Cost his family a billion to get him back. I never figured he was worth that much."

Maks stretched out his arm, the control in his hand. John edged toward him again, ready to break and run at the first false move.

"That was slick, the way you got over the wall," Maks said conversationally. "Why didn't the sensor pick you up?"

"Oh, that fucking gadget. I got myself ticketed for being in the hall without a pass, the ticket got me into the headmaster's office. I shut off the sensor in there, ducked out and climbed the wall. Kids," he said, stretching out his hand, "always have ways of getting out."

"Ah, yes," said Maks, his thumb hovering over the activating stud. "I know that from personal experience."

John's fingers, one of which sported a small dirty bandage, closed over the end of the control and Maks touched the stud.

The next sound was an unhuman scream, the sound of an animal suddenly caught in a trap. Maks grabbed the boy, there was an instant of wild struggle and John went limp.

They were lying side by side in a darkly gleaming metal tube. Automatic doors opened, and the shelf beneath them slid them soundlessly forward into the muted light of the transport room at Pastplor.

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Maks checked the boy's pulse and heartbeat and carried him through the inner door and down a private corridor to his office and stretched him on a divan. He fetched a hypodermic gun from the dispensary and gave John two shots: the so-called universal, to knock out ancient diseases he might be carrying, and a sedative to keep him asleep for a few hours.

Then he began going through his pockets. Somehow this boy held the answer to the intricate conspiracy that had begun with the kidnapping of his own son, and he meant to find out what it was.

Boys' pockets turned out not to have changed much in three hundred years. Maks found a pocket knife, a ring with mechanical keys, a condom — how old was the boy, twelve? Must be starting young — plus assorted rubbish. His limp wallet contained ticket stubs to something called the Kennedy Center, a picture of a girl with oriental features and wires on her teeth — why? wondered Maks. Some kind of communication device? But why on the teeth? A thousand-dollar bill, much folded — probably his allowance — and, hidden in a crude secret compartment, a picture clipped from the hardcopy version of *Cybertattle*.

Maks stared at the picture. Gasped. Turned it over. Scrawled on the back were the words, "My old man the bastard skum."

Finally he found his voice and said aloud, "But how?"

He was still facing this unanswerable question when his mashina chimed.

"Not now," he said. "Tell whoever it is that I'm out."

"Honored Major," said the atonal voice, "I have the honor to bring you a direct order from General Yamashita."

"Great Tao. All right, what is it?"

"Quote: tell Maks to get his fucking ass to Yost's office in the command suite and do it now, unquote. Is there any reply?"

No human face showed in Captain Pali's mashina with its multiple secure channels. Instead, a double cone hung suspended in the shadowbox.

Benjo had selected that logo for the "operation," as those involved called the conspiracy. He said it represented an hourglass, and when Pali asked what that was, he answered with a smile that an hourglass was a symbol of time.

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An arbot's voice began speaking. "Have you received the new monitors?"

"Yes. I understand we're to insert them in the stari now?"

"Yes, and quickly. The general's decided that our guests as well as members of our organization must be traceable, for improved top-down control. The general is very strong for control."

"We'll begin at once. Twelve insertions by hypodermic gun — that won't take long."

"Be quick. You'll be having visitors from headquarters soon. Matters may be coming to a head."

"Do I understand that the 'operation' is almost ended?"

"I am not authorized to discuss that."

The double cone shrank to a glowing dot and vanished. The prickle of lasers in the shadowbox ceased. The mashina shut itself off.

Smiling his gentle smile, Captain Pali removed a major's insignia from the drawer of his desk and polished the bit of gold against his chest.

He deserved the promotion he saw coming. As an honest cop and an honorable man, he had helped to unmask a swindler — one who had dared to try to corrupt the Security Forces. As an ambitious guy, he'd incidentally proved that Maks, the man blocking his advancement at Plastpor, deserved demotion if not something worse.

Not that he really approved of kidnapping, but internal polizi politics were rough. It was by proving you were rough, too, that you won the respect of your superiors.

Of course the teahouse was full of kloppi. Silly Benjo thought he could find the "bugs," as he called them, by looking for them. But these days, kloppi might look like grains of sand or even particles of dust, each one packed with nanomachines. By now kloppi were ground into his clothes, packed under his fingernails, engrained in the very pores of his skin.

And what a tale those tiny devices had picked up and recorded on the memory cubes now resting in the queue of Pali's mashina!

Smiling, quick and gentle of aspect as ever, Pali left his office and went about his assigned tasks.

The day had advanced by an hour or two when a delegation of five thuggi arrived. Informed by Pali's arbot secretary that he was walking in the garden — actually, he was headed for the teahouse to fetch Benjo, the

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only one of the stari who hadn't yet received a monitor — one of the thuggi drew an impact pistol and went after him.

After some consultation among themselves the others decided to go ahead with the rest of their assigned task. Someone had neglected to inform Pali that the monitors inserted in the stari were like those inserted in prisoners — that is, they carried attached neurotoxin pellets. When activated, the pellets almost instantaneously shut down the entire motor nervous system.

The thuggi stood in a group around Pali's mashina while their leader punched in the activating code.

BEES HAD NEVER buzzed so loudly — well, perhaps they weren't bees; some sort of modified fly the scientists had developed to pollinate flowers in a world where all the bees had died.

Anyway, they buzzed. And the sky was blue, and this unbelievable man was walking by Sherì's side, talking about his future plans when, without warning, she stumbled and fell.

Quite suddenly she was kneeling on something soft. She was kneeling on Pali's stomach. She looked down into what was left of his face and screamed.

He had been shot by an impact weapon. Or had shot himself. He still held a gun in his hand. Above her, she heard Benjo make a strangled sound.

His eyes were wide and staring. Over his head passed a sleek bluish shape, a polizi hovercar. The gravity compensator shut down and the rotary landing engines began to howl. In the distance she heard other engines, and somebody was shouting.

"Christ, Christ, they're onto me," he gasped in the hoarsest voice she'd ever heard.

He seized her hand, jerked her to her feet and began to run, dragging her behind him. Then stopped so suddenly that Sherí cannoned into him. Stunned, frightened, she saw what Benjo was staring at.

More corpses. The stari were lying here and there. The woman who thought she still owned a chunk of the Dotcom Cartel had fallen on the path. An elegantly coiffed wig had fallen off; she was bald. The executive

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from Tiffany-Cartier had died inspecting a blossom. The young orthodox Jew with connections to the diamond trade had slumped over on a rustic bench, a Hebrew devotional book in his hand. A spit-curl of dark hair still clung to his ear.

Sherí let out a faint cry and clutched at Benjo, waiting for whatever had killed the others to strike her, too. But the seconds ticked by.

Then Benjo shook her, hissed, "Sherí, you got to get us out of here."

For another moment she stood staring at him.

"The key," she said.

"What?"

She ran back and knelt by Pali's corpse. His wound was horrible, the head half blown away. Averting her eyes, she searched his beltpouch and seized the electronic key, a slip of silvery metal six centimeters long.

Meantime Benjo was taking the weapon from the dead man's hand, hefting it, eyeing it curiously.

The noises were coming closer. Clearly the polizi had missed Benjo when they counted the dead and now were systematically quartering the garden in search of him.

"This way," she said, and led him back past the teahouse, heading for the postern gate. She added, "You can't fire that thing yet. Put your thumb there — that's the recognition stud. Hold it tight for one minute."

"Lucky," muttered Benjo, "you being married to a cop."

A few minutes later they were on the street behind the compound. Beyond the wall, human shouts mingled with the roars of Darksiders.

She told him, "Those clothes are impossible, Benjo. You'll be picked up in no time."

"Wait a minute."

Down the street a man in workman's attire was trundling a cart of gardener's tools toward an open gate in the wall of a private villa. Benjo quietly approached him. Sherí saw the gardener half turn, then gawk at the strangely dressed fellow. His mouth was still half open in astonishment when Benjo karate-chopped him on the side of the neck.

Benjo came back, pulling the man's dusty coveralls over his Armani suit. The legs were too long and gathered over his polished shoes in dusty bundles like the feet of an elephant.

"Don't laugh at me," he warned her — a fop to the end.

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At a pylon Sherí called a hovercab, and a few minutes later they were soaring. Down below, they could see squads of thuggi fanning out into the streets to begin a house-by-house and garden-by-garden search. Nothing had saved them but the time the polizi had lost searching for Benjo inside the compound.

"I'd always hoped to see the city," he muttered, staring at the skyline of Ulanor. "But not like this."

"I wonder if that man was badly hurt," she whispered.

"What man?"

Clearly, gardeners counted even less than most people in Benjo's world. In fact, his extraordinary self-confidence was flowing back into him. He told her he was not impressed by Ulanor.

"So that's the Worldcity? Is that all? It's not as big as Brooklyn."

Sherí sank back against the dusty upholstery. She'd given her own address to the cab's black box. Where else could they go? And what would they do when they got there?

As usual, he knew what she was thinking and took her hands in his. "Look, honey, you got to be brave. We don't have any other option."

"But what's going to happen to us?" she asked helplessly.

"Don't worry. I got a plan. Say, how many bullets are in this thing?"

Cautiously he spread the flaps of his coverall and let her see the back end of the pistol.

"See there?" she whispered. "That's the counter. That little window — like an old-fashioned camera. Two shots left."

"Christ, that's not much. Still, how many bullets do you need to shoot yourself?"

"Why would Pali shoot himself?" she asked blankly.

"Because, obviously, he was my contact in the Security Forces. He set up the whole deal in return for the information I gave him. When the scheme collapsed he shot himself. Or," he added thoughtfully, "that's how it's meant to look."

He relapsed into silence, frowning. He was still brooding when the cab drew up to the 12th-stage doorway in Sherí's building.

Getting Benjo into the apartment was surprisingly easy. The thuggi were dozing, as usual; when one of them opened his eyes, she said simply, "This *robotchi's* doing some cleaning for us."

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Robotchi meant a working stiff. The thug glanced at Benjo's coveralls, nodded, and closed his eyes again.

Inside, with Benjo trailing her, she searched the rooms, the bath of poured stone, the dining-cooking area with its round table and half-moon benches and polished hotspots behind blue duroplast shields. Finally the bedroom.

"Where's my son? Will Maks bring my son here?" Benjo demanded, his voice sharp.

"Where else can he take him?"

He paced up and down. "Then maybe I can still straighten everything out. Hey. Anything to drink around here?"

"People nowadays usually smoke kif to relax. It's synthetic pot mixed with some other drugs."

"Impair the reflexes?"

"No."

"Then let's get lightly stoned. I have to admit that getting fucked by you and chased by the cops on the same day is tiring. I'm not as young as I used to be."

She threw a handful of kif into the censer and turned on the heating element.

"And when Maks gets home?" she asked.

"Then," said Benjo, "we'll all have a heart-to-heart talk."

Maks arrived breathless in Yost's office to find Yamashita there ahead of him.

The room was small and nondescript, with walls of dull whitish semiplast and a jumble of leftover furniture. Unlike his chief, Yost put up no front, projected no image of power; that was his great strength — also his weakness.

He and the general were standing in front of Yost's big mashina, staring at a schematic of the Palace of Justice. Maks had no trouble recognizing the intricate structure with its maze of rooms and corridors and glowing red spots that denoted guardposts.

This schematic also showed hundreds of small blue and greenish yellow dots that reminded him of the lights of the Great Shield. Some clustered in the command suite, some around the courts of law and the

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corridors of Yost's kingdom, Special Investigations. Some of the dots were still, some in motion.

Yost saw his bafflement.

"Blue indicates polizi," he explained. He pointed at a group of three blues. "The general, you and me, for instance. The others are Darksiders."

Yamashita's thick finger stabbed a cluster of one yellow and two blue dots.

"See that, Maks? The mashina spotted it and Yost called me at once. Empty storage unit — supposed to be locked. What the fuck are a Darksider and two thuggi doing in an empty storage unit?"

Maks's first thought was that both his superiors had gone crazy at the same moment. Who cared whether two men and an animal were dozing in an empty room?

"Come on!" Yamashita barked, and led them into the corridor.

More Darksiders lounged around the command suite; he gestured, and three of the great beasts joined them. All were heavily armed and the metal of impact weapons and bandoliers clanked as they followed the humans with bowlegged strides.

Thuggi stared and clerks shrank back into offices as the strange parade moved at doubletime through the well-lighted marble hallways, then plunged into a maze of anonymous passages.

Corridors, corridors. The Palace of Justice was a honeycomb without sweetness. Gray walls, gray matting, gray doors with no identifying marks. Corridors that met at right angles, at wrong angles, at any possible angles. Ramps rising to the next stage, moving walks that had long ago rusted into stillness. Guard posts stuck seemingly in the middle of noplace. In public areas, employees of the courts carrying sheafs of hardcopy, glimpses of courtrooms with accused men and women kneeling before the bar of justice while onlookers gawked. The smell of mosh and misery hung heavy in the air.

They turned into a corridor so narrow they had to string out in single file behind Yamashita. At the dead end was a dim-lit atrium with one dusty luminous panel in the ceiling and three low metal doors with security locks. One stood ajar.

"The boy's gone," said Yost. His desk-bound lungs panted with his

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recent exertion but his voice was as toneless as ever. "They've moved him again."

Yamashita must have had the same thought, for he uttered a curse as he kicked the door wide open. Then Maks was pushing past his superiors, shouldering Yamashita aside without regard to his rank and stars.

He stumbled into the cell and an agonized howl burst from his throat.

Against the wall stood a small bed splashed with blood. Two human bodies in uniform lay pulped and battered against one wall. Beside the bed crouched a gigantic Darksider holding an impact pistol. The barrel swung toward Maks.

Then Sandi ran out from behind the Darksider and into his father's arms. The creature lowered its weapon; Maks squeezed his son in a rib-cracking hug. After a moment, Sandi wormed free, and grasped one of the Darksider's free thumbs.

"Papa," he said, "this is Grila."

Maks felt he was in a dream as he scratched the monster's ears. His son a prisoner here in the Palace of Justice? Sandi's life saved by a Darksider? His hiding place brilliantly uncovered by Yost, of all people?

Maks slowly turned to Yost, reached out and shook his hand. The hand was long, cold, bony and damp, and the eyes that met his looked like tea stains. But there it was: between them, a torturer and an armored beast had recovered his son for him, alive and unharmed.

"Take the boy to his mother," said Yamashita, after blowing his nose.

Staring at the general's face Maks received a final shock. He knew that Yamashita had long ago erected a Chinese wall in his mind between business and home, that on his days off he was said to be a faithful husband and doting father. But to see something glimmering in his small jetty eyes was as great a surprise as any the day had brought forth.

Maks knew he was facing bad times, but being able to deliver Sandi to Maia almost compensated for them. With her he was able to do what would have been out of the question in the Palace of Justice — cry, laugh, and finally relax.

He felt that he had strayed a long way away from himself, from his true nature, from everything that mattered to him. What had Maia said to him once? He wasn't mean enough to head the Security Forces, and he

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wasn't smart enough, either. Had he really divorced Sandi's mother because she told him unpalatable truths?

As he watched her hugging their son, he knew with sad finality that they would never be reunited. There had been that time in New York when, nursing a bruised ego, he met an impossibly beautiful woman and fell in love like a boy. That was a fact. He'd saved Sherí's life and forever changed his own.

That didn't prevent friendship with Maia, even a kind of love free from passion. When Sandi was asleep in his own bed, Maks had a few quiet minutes alone with her.

"Poor Maks. You're looking completely used up," she said. "Well, I know how you feel. I feel the same way."

"There's still a lot to be done," he sighed. "I wish I could go to sleep for about two months, but I can't."

"Do you know who did it?"

"I know one of them. I still don't see how he managed it. He had to've had help. Help from inside the Forces."

"Oh, Maks, I was afraid of that. And you don't know who his accomplice was?"

"No. I've wasted a lot of time suspecting Yost. He's got the power to pull a thing like that, also the brains, and I'm sure he views me as a threat to his position because the general thinks so much of me. But Yost found Sandi for us — that's a fact. I can't believe he'd have left the boy alive if he was involved in the kidnapping. Sandi might have noticed something, some clue that would lead back to him. He's too careful to leave a loose end like that."

"So you still don't know?"

"No." He smiled wanly at her. "I'm just not smart enough, that's all."

"Poor Maks," she said. "Don't you know there are enough smart people in the world? What we need are more brave and decent ones. That's your strong suit. Why don't you play it?"

He hugged her before leaving. "If anything happens to me, Maia, take good care of the boy."

"What could happen? Maks, what aren't you telling me?"

"I have to go home and get some sleep. Then I'm going back to the office and turn over some evidence to Yamashita. He and Yost have to

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crack this case, because I can't. And when they ask me how I got the evidence, well — I'll have to tell them."

"Oh, Maks, this isn't a beheader, is it?"

"Frankly, my head's feeling a bit wobbly. There, you've always been after me to tell you the truth. I just did, and now look, you're unhappy. What is it you want, anyway?"

She tried to match his sardonic smile and failed.

"Oh my dear, what a jungle we're in. How will we ever get out? Can't we all go back in time, back beyond the Troubles, to Wordsworth's England or Whitman's America?"

"Ssh," he said. "Don't say things like that out loud."

"Well then, is it all right to think them?"

"Yes," he said. "Just...think them."

MAKS ENTERED his apartment feeling leaden, exhausted. The first glance showed a robotchi in dusty coveralls, probably there to haul trash.

Ignoring him, Maks went straight to Sherí and embraced her.

"Oh Maks, what happened?" she whispered. "Did you find John Hammer?"

"In a minute," he said. "Bring me kif and don't make me talk for a while."

To Benjo he added: "Whatever you're doing can wait."

Benjo shuffled to the door and paused. Maks sprawled on the divan while Sherí loaded a pipe for him with shaking hands.

She heard Maks say to Benjo, "You waiting for your pay? How much do I owe you?"

"A lot, Honored Major," Benjo smiled. "My son, to begin with."

Maks stared at Benjo's pistol, then slowly turned his eyes to Sherí.

"Has he hurt you?" he asked.

"No," she whispered.

It was on the tip of her tongue to say, "Yes, he raped me, he's been holding me prisoner," but she didn't.

Benjo was not a gentleman. He'd either kill her at once, or betray her to the polizi if he was taken prisoner. No, there was no way out of this one. She'd made her choice and there was no going back.

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Benjo spared her one cool glance — he'd read her mind again — and then turned back to Maks.

"Where is my son, Major?"

Sherí was amazed to see a slight smile begin to lighten Maks's drawn face. What could he be thinking?

"In the Palace of Justice, surrounded by a hundred Darksiders. On the other hand, my son's free. Stick that up your nose, you piece of shit."

During his adventures in time Maks had had plenty of chances to use Archaic English. But he had never enjoyed doing so as much as in that last sentence.

Benjo sat down rather suddenly. Eyeing him narrowly, Maks felt reluctant respect. There he sat, alone, confronting a whole hostile world, yet the pistol in his hand never wavered.

"Have you ever heard the phrase 'Mexican standoff'?" Benjo asked.

"No."

"It means neither side can win, but each can destroy the other."

"Is that our situation?"

"I believe so."

"What do you propose?"

Now it was Benjo who was smiling. Sherí winced, knowing what was coming.

"To allow you to live, provided you send Sherí and me back through the wormholer."

Maks whitened. He stared at Sherí, but didn't need to ask a question. Her face was a study in fear, defiance, and above all, guilt.

"She's been visiting me for months," said Benjo, twisting the knife. "Your friend Pali arranged everything, including the kidnapping."

Maks tried to speak once, twice, and failed. The blow to his ego was savage; why then did he feel so little surprise? For whatever reason, Sherí had gone back to her own kind, and he could find nothing to say.

Suddenly he wanted only to be rid of both of them.

"Where do you want to go?" he asked quietly, so quietly that Sherí stared at him in surprise.

"Back to our own era. But with enough time — that word keeps coming up, doesn't it? — to get ourselves from the Earth to Luna before the Troubles begin. And to transfer some assets. Say a year. Send us back to November 2090."

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Maks looked at Sherí. "Is that what you want?"

She had trouble meeting his eyes. "Yes. You won't believe me but I'm feeling terribly, terribly guilty and miserable about what happened."

He shrugged. He seemed to dismiss her entirely.

"And your son?" he asked Benjo.

"When we get back I'll snatch John from his mother and that goddamn school no matter what I have to do — get him out before you arrive to kidnap him — and take him to Luna with us. That's the only thing I can think of."

Maks rose. Benjo got up, too.

"Then let's go."

Maks had to pull rank to get Benjo, wearing his robotchi disguise, into Pastplor; fortunately, he had rank to pull. In half an hour the twenty-first-century businessman was in the transport room with Maks and Sherí, staring at the device he had seen only once before, and that time in such a state of confusion and rage and fear that he hadn't seen much.

Maks made them lie down on the metal slide, and gave them eyeshields to wear. Benjo held his a little raised. The pistol that had entered Pastplor in his pocket was now in his hand.

"Pay attention to the orders he gives that goddamn gadget," he warned Sherí. "I don't want Maks sending us to the Ice Age or something."

He watched narrowly as Maks spoke to the control mashina in Alspeke, rattling off four-dimensional coordinates in a rapid sequence of numbers and coded commands.

"Any last words?" Maks asked.

"Yes," said Benjo. "You may not believe it but I'm sorry about your kid. I'm sorry about your wife. I'm sorry I had to hurt you."

"Oh, I am too, Maks!" cried Sherí passionately. "Oh, I am too!"

"Activate," said Maks to the mashina, and at the same instant Benjo touched the firing stud of his pistol.

Standing among the red flags of autumn trees on the slope above Rock Creek Park, Benjo smiled at Sherí.

"You killed him!" she cried. "You killed him, you — you bastard!"

"Oh, honey," he said. "How inadequate."

"You told him those lies about being sorry just to put him off guard for a second, and then you shot him!"

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Benjo shrugged. "Had to. If I hadn't, he'd have come after us. Instead, here we are and nobody from that world knows where. Nobody to pursue us. Nobody to interfere while we find John and get ourselves to Luna."

He pulled off the dirty coveralls, rolled them up and flung them into the trees. His Armani suit was stained and smudged with the dirt of another world. But Benjo radiated power.

"Think about it!" he bragged. "Even with everything I've done in my life, I never managed a thing like this. A whole fucking world after me, and I won and they lost!"

As she had so often before, Sherí yielded again.

"Oh Benjo," she sighed, "you appall me, but — but — yes, here we are. And you did do it. You're incredible. And as for us — when we go to Luna we'll take Mama with us, right?"

"Sure, honey. Whatever you want."

She threw her arms around him.

"Oh God," she whispered, "I can't believe it. To live out our lives now — in our own time — "

A little sound, somewhat like a cough.

Sherí's body flung backward, striking the ground, rolling over once as it went down the slope. Benjo looked down at her bloody corpse.

He said softly, "Sorry to do it, but I really have no intention of spending the rest of my life with an asshole."

He slipped the impact pistol back into his pocket and eyed the swift flow of bright-colored cars down the parkway. Yeah, one of them would do to take him to Reagan National —

Then a disturbance made him turn his head. A little whirlwind? Leaves blew up, revolved. In the center something like an eddy of multicolored snow took form, solidified into Maks himself.

"He survived! He's come after me!" was Benjo's first thought, and he automatically leaped among the trees to hide himself.

Then he realized that Maks was simply on his mission, the mission Benjo had assigned him, to kidnap John Hammer.

Benjo watched Maks as he spotted the mangled body of a woman, averted his eyes, and strode quickly away. Benjo steadied his pistol against the white trunk of a young aspen and prepared to fire.

"To think," he whispered. "Killing the poor son of a bitch twice!"

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A party of runners was approaching along the jogging trail. Not much time. Benjo touched the firing stud.

The pistol emitted a small apologetic beep. An instant later the runners, accompanied by their armed guards, were close at hand. Benjo lowered his sophisticated and entirely useless weapon. Not another round of the proper ammunition existed anywhere on Earth, or would exist for centuries to come.

Maks crossed the path, striding swiftly, and soon disappeared.

Benjo tossed his gun away, far away into the deep leaves, and set off walking. Almost half a minute elapsed before he realized the meaning of this encounter.

Maks had taken John on the very eve of the Troubles, late in the autumn of 2091. So he'd tricked Sherí when he was reeling off that sequence of coded commands to the wormholer.

"Oh, you fucking dumb broad," he muttered.

Christ, he thought, I don't have a year to snatch my son, arrange passage to Luna, transfer assets, prepare for the coming storm. I've got days at most.

Maks was now far ahead of him, moving with the speed of a younger man to do exactly what Benjo had commanded him to do — kidnap John and take him back to Ulanor, far out of reach of anyone in this dying world.

Benjo groaned and grasped his head in both hands. He lurched down the slope in pursuit, wading in the deep leaves of the last autumn that Earth would know for years to come. His foot struck a log hidden in the drifted gold and scarlet and he fell headlong. Dry leaves billowed up around him, and his right ankle twisted with a yellow spark of pain.

When he tried to get up he knew the injury must be a bad sprain. He tried to curse, but nothing he could possibly say seemed adequate. He had a vision of Maks striding on like fate, far ahead and lengthening the distance with every stride, taking his son where Benjo could never follow.

He groaned and began to crawl back up the slope, searching for a fallen limb sturdy enough to use as a temporary crutch or cane. As he worked his way along his mind continued to function, almost independently of him, secreting ideas as automatically as his gall bladder went on making bile.

By the time he had found a limb that met his needs and risen to his

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feet with its aid and that of a pine sapling, he knew what he must do. The only thing, in fact, that he could do.

He hobbled down the slope, ankle throbbing, cursing at every breath, but no longer confused or despairing. Kidnapping Maks's son had failed. Taking John from the school and escaping to Luna had failed. Come hell or high water, he had now formulated Plan Three.

A taxi was proceeding sedately along Rock Creek Parkway in the curbside lane when Benjo deliberately stepped in front of it. The cab squealed and shuddered to a halt at the very toes of his shoes, and the driver, an Iranian, leaped out screaming colorful oaths in Farsi and English.

Benjo threw up one palm, interrupting the flow, and said, "My name is Benjamin Kurosawa. I have more money than anybody in the world. I just escaped from kidnappers. Take me to Reagan National and I'll make you rich beyond your wildest dreams."

The man stared at him from behind a bristle of black beard. Other cars had squealed to a halt, drivers were cursing, and the sound of crumpling metal told of rear-enders stretching into the distance. The driver waved at his passenger, an alarmed-looking old lady.

"Meester, I got a fare — "

"Tell her to shove over," said Benjo, and crowded into the back of the cab.

"My God, Mr. Kurosawa, where've you been?"

His bodyguard stared at the man who had just passed through the scanner at the front door of the Kurosawa palace at 997 Park Avenue.

"Riding a goddamn helicab from Kennedy. Why?"

"Well, sir, we been looking for you. Couldn't find you anywhere in the house, and we didn't know you'd gone out."

"Is Penrose here?"

"Your valet? Yes, sir."

"Well, call him on the house phone and tell him I need everything, beginning with a hot bath."

Interesting, thought Benjo, ascending to the top floor in a small, silent elevator. So two versions of me can't coexist at the same time. At the time I arrived back the earlier version must've evaporated.

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He emerged into the main hall of his living quarters on the fourteenth floor. Windowless, of course, for security. Penrose met him and Benjo entered his bedroom shedding clothes, which the valet gathered up, tch-tching over the state of the $2,000,000 suit.

"Forget it," said Benjo. "Lay out some traveling clothes. Where's LaJuan?" He meant his private-private secretary and part-time mistress. "In the office downstairs? Well, tell her to book me through to Moscow on the 6 P.M. SST. What's the date?"

"November 23rd."

"And just remind me — the year?"

"Twenty ninety-one," said a baffled Penrose.

"Oh, Christ. That's what I figured. Gimme that robe. And call LaJuan now. I want some stuff from the vault. And get me an elastic bandage. I sprained my ankle pretty bad."

Half an hour later, somewhat cleaner and dressed in modish traveler's gear that included plaid socks, plus-fours and a vicuña coat, he was seated in his private office, talking into a viewphone.

"Goddammit, Alexei, assassins are gonna try to kill the mayor of St. Petersburg tomorrow night, your time. Don't ask me how I know. I just do."

A Russian-English translator program put through the reply, delayed a few seconds while the lips of Alexei Dromov, a colonel in the Russian Internal Security Directorate, moved soundlessly.

"We have received no indication of any such plot. What's your evidence?"

"I heard it from a source I'm not at liberty to divulge. But it's a solid source, a really solid source."

"Huh. Pretty thin. Anybody but you, my old benefactor, I'd just hang up."

Benjo had paid Dromov well over the years for a variety of services, and the radiance of shared corruption still warmed their relationship.

"So what're you gonna do about it? You know I wouldn't risk my credibility unless there was something going on."

"The president's planning to address the Duma here in Moscow, so we've committed just about all our assets to the Kremlin. Including some guys we've pulled in from Petersburg. If you're sure about this, I can send them back and tell the mayor to stay indoors."

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"I am sure. Absolutely, totally sure. You won't regret this, Alexei. There's a promotion in your future, sure as shit."

Satisfied, Benjo cut the connection just as Dromov was mouthing, "*Do svidanye*," which the software translated as "Bye-bye."

LaJuan knocked and entered as Benjo sat drumming his fingers on his desk. She had cafe-au-lait skin and golden hair and eyes so deeply outlined by kohl that they resembled Egyptian tomb paintings. Her exotic form concealed relentless efficiency.

"Tickets," she said, presenting them. "Harry's at the door with the armored limo. Here's the stuff you specified from the vault. I guess something big must be up. Got time for a kiss?"

"Yeah. There, that's enough. When my dick gets hard, my brain goes soft."

In the limo, crouched behind the bulletproof glass, Benjo again hit the phone. This time he called a man named Korovin, also in Moscow.

"Hey, Pyotr, how you been?"

"Keeping busy."

Speaking eight languages, Korovin needed no translators to serve as chief lawyer for the Moscow Mafia. The contrast between him and Dromov underlined Benjo's belief that people in the private sector were always smarter than bureaucrats.

"Listen, Counselor, I got some work to be done. It's big. So's the payoff. I'm coming to your town now, landing at Vnukovo on the 2400 SST. Can we talk?"

"My man will meet you," said Korovin, and communication ceased.

Well, thought Benjo, trying to relax, I've done what I can to divert attention from Moscow, so Korovin's men will find it easier to kill this Defense Minister who's going to start the war. If they succeed, there won't be any Worldcity. My son will be back studying useless shit in Georgetown. Little what's-her-name, Sherí, will never cannon into a man with a strange haircut on 57th Street. She can have her two-bit life with Mama in some dump on York Avenue, and welcome to it.

More to the point, I'll live out my life here in this world I know so well. And oh Christ, will I become a pacifist. I'll hire an army of hitmen and knock off anybody who even thinks about war.

"You got a big grin on, Mr. Kurosawa," ventured Harry.

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"Yeah, I'm done being a hardnosed bastard, Harry. I'm gonna become a great philanthropoid, or whatever they call it."

"That's good, Mr. Kurosawa. Doing good is kinda nice, once in a while."

MEETING NIGHT just east of Long Island, the SST soared into starlit darkness, the ruddy smudge of sunset gleaming on its six-story tail. Unearthly quiet surrounded it; the roar of its engines had been left far behind.

Benjo sat in one of the first-class modules — comfortable, anodized-aluminum half cylinders that gave their inhabitants an extra measure of comfort and an agreeable sense of separation from passengers who couldn't afford them. A VR headset hung above his head, ready to supply sixty channels of entertainment, but Benjo was in no mood for pornography, videogames, interactive horseplay with the Three Stooges, or the ten most popular movies of the day.

He needed to relax. His chair shaped itself to his body and began a quiet massage. On a small table rested a dish with crackers and caviar, a snifter of Remy Martin, and a viewphone he didn't dare to use because none of the channels were secure.

Instead Benjo sipped liquid fire and munched salty beluga roe until a charming, dark-haired flight attendant stopped at his seat to murmur, "Dinner, Mr. K."

"What you got tonight, honey?"

"The best thing is the *coq au vin*."

"What, again? I had that last time I flew. Oh, hell, bring it anyway."

He turned on the soothing strains of neo-heavymetal and pressed deeper into his seat. The massager worked away. The odors of food drifted through the cabin. The cognac exhaled its own fragrance.

Cautiously he took from an inner pocket a small, tightly wrapped package. One by one he squeezed small pouches of soft cream-colored faux leather onto the table. Glancing suspiciously to left and right, he opened them one by one and gazed briefly at the jewels they contained.

Forty carats in brilliant-cut white diamonds. A ginger-colored stone that outweighed them all. Tiny lights twinkled in faceted depths, as if the

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stones were lenses leading the eye into a world of perfect, serene beauty. This was the payoff he would offer Korovin: ransom for a world.

He thought of the stories Pali had told him about Xian Xi-qing's obsession with jewels, and how as a result Maks had been sent to kidnap Benjo, accidentally giving him the knowledge and opportunity to save his world and destroy Xian's. Great jewels were more than stones, they were myths and legends and tales of greed and suffering, none more incredible than the fantasy he was now living.

He took out another stone — this one bluer than any sky, than the eyes of any blonde beloved. Benjo groaned aloud. Not the Hope!

When the expenses of the rebellion in Idaho and Montana caused the government to cut back, the subsidies to the Smithsonian had fallen to the budget axe. At the same time, private contributions had withered and the stocks in the endowment had crashed, largely because of Benjo's operations on Wall Street.

As a result, the treasures of the Jewel Room had been sold off and the Hope had come to him. Mysterious in its origins, more fable than stone, this 45.5-carat chunk of crystallized carbon was the heart of his collection. Was it worth saving the world, saving his son, saving his life, if Korovin demanded the Hope?

He slipped the blue diamond back into its pouch and tucked it into a different pocket from the rest.

"If I have to," he thought. "But only if."

An hour later the dinners had been removed and the plane's interior had darkened. With seats reclined, most passengers huddled under blankets. A few wore headsets from which faint buzzes and beeps suggested videogames in progress. Six miles beneath the plane, the white jigsaw of the Arctic ice sheet slipped by, unnoticed.

In the semidarkness a few people moved about, going to and from the toilets, seeking a drink or a snack from the lighted galley in the tail. In the first-class modules, attendants responded to occasional signals, but by and large the wide aisles were empty. Benjo tried to sleep, but finally admitted that the possibility of the world ending tomorrow night made rest unlikely.

"Not as young as I used to be," he muttered, and left his module to stretch and yawn.

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"Can I assist you, Mr. K?" asked the pretty flight attendant.

For an instant Benjo considered doing something really wild, just for the hell of it — offering a total stranger a five-carat diamond for a blowjob.

Then he dismissed the thought. You never knew when a little *jeu d'esprit* like that might cause a commotion. Tomorrow night — if there was a tomorrow night — he'd celebrate.

"No, honey," he said, and limped down the aisle between softly glowing luminescent lines, headed for the first-class toilets.

Inside, he did his business, then stood viewing himself in the three-dimensional mirror. Getting baggy eyes. It's all this goddamn worry. What I been through, it's enough to kill a young man. Got to try stem-cell therapy. Didn't work so well during the experimental phase, but now I hear the lab boys are getting the process down right.

He sighed at the passage of time, washed his hands and face, shut his eyes when the warm wind of the drier cut on. He rubbed a little fragrant oil from a dispenser into his skin, turned and opened the door.

The light fell full on Maks and the impact weapon in his hand coughed once, flinging Benjo back into the restroom. Maks stepped in, bent over him, then straightened up and closed the door, turning on the OCCUPIED sign outside. He touched the stud of a wormholer control in his beltpouch.

THE SST SOARED on, passing inland over Archangel and the snow-powdered fields of Russia. A half-hour later at Vnukovo International Airport, Korovin's man found nobody to meet.

But perhaps the Moscow Mafia had some people among the *militsiya* who crowded into the plane when a shattered body was discovered in one of the first-class toilets. For, while most of the diamonds were recovered from Benjo's pockets, the Hope had disappeared.

Maks swung his legs off the slide of the wormholer, stood up shakily and handed over his pistol to Colonel Yost. Resistance didn't occur to Maks; he was dead on his feet. In any case, he'd given his word.

"You see," he muttered. "I did come back."

Yost nodded. His feelings about Maks had never been so mixed as at this moment. The monitor circulating in Maks's body — of which he

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knew nothing — would have enabled the Security Forces to pursue and kill him.

Despite his annoyance at Maks's failure to do the logical thing and so provoke his own destruction, Yost felt reluctant respect for someone so — so what? Brave, foolish, old-fashioned?

The arrest proceeded in impeccable style. One of Yost's thuggi did a hasty and casual pat-down, just to make sure the prisoner wasn't carrying another weapon.

While this was going on, Yost gestured at a meter-wide crater blown in the wall of the transport room. "Kurosawa tried to shoot you, then?"

"Yes," said Maks. His own voice seemed to resonate, now loud, now soft. He had a feeling that time was slowing to a stop.

"I knew he would. The shot had to come just after I gave the mashina its orders. And while I may not be the brightest kid on the block, I have excellent reflexes."

Yost nodded. Armed with evidence from Pali's mashina, he and his party had forced their way into the room just as Maks rose from the floor, his hair full of dust from the shattered wall.

Quickly he'd explained about Benjo, about sending him back to the verge of the Troubles, about the possibility that a ruthless trillionaire might somehow contrive to stop them from happening.

It had been one of those moments when Yost proved what a great chief of security he might make if Yamashita ever stepped aside and allowed him to show his stuff. In a few seconds he'd grasped the danger and seen the opportunity of ridding himself of both Benjo and Maks.

It had been an astonishingly bold act — arming his captive and sending him back in time, telling him about the kloppi Benjo still carried in his body, giving him a commdisk and the frequency so that he could track them. And Yost had been justified by the results. Maks wasn't dead or fleeing, but he was here once again in Yost's hands.

"I may have underestimated you, Major," he said as the party left Pastplor.

Terrified workers stared at their boss being led away under arrest, but Yost ignored them. He was honestly trying to understand how Maks's mind worked, and for once his acute mind faltered. He could only suppose that Maks had come back to make one last foolhardy effort to save his career.

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As for Maks, he was too tired to notice either his subordinates or his captors. He shuffled along, unconsciously imitating the habitual gait of prisoners whose loose, soft slippers would fall off if they lifted their feet.

Through his mind ran only his last picture of Sherí, crying out how sorry she was just as Maks sent her back to the Troubles. The difference between *zvan novan*, twenty ninety, and *zvan novanda*, twenty ninety-one, had escaped her. On such tiny points destinies turn. If he had not been so weary, he would have wept.

When they arrived at the general's office, Yost murmured a few sentences in Yamashita's ear, then absented himself without waiting to be asked.

Yamashita sat at his immense desk looking much more dangerous than when he raged. Like the Martian petrified wood, he seemed to have fossilized into some substance more unyielding than mere flesh. A long, silent minute passed with Maks at attention and the general looking at him without blinking.

"Got anything you want to say?" he asked at last.

This was standard polizi tactics. The prisoner was invited to accuse himself before hearing the charges against him. Often in making a statement he incriminated himself further.

Maks knew the routine and said nothing. Instead, he took the Hope from his beltpouch and laid it on the desk.

"Something to make the Controller happy," he said, adding, "And I've killed Benjo. He was on his way to prevent the Troubles, but he won't do it now."

Slowly Yamashita's eyes traveled down to the diamond, then back to Maks. He grunted.

"Now tell me about this woman you brought forward and married."

"She's been returned to her own time."

"You're good at cleaning up the messes you make," Yamashita acknowledged. "Who is this boy Yost tells me he found in your office?"

"Benjo Kurosawa's son. He was the ransom demanded for mine."

"Very interesting. That's two unauthorized people you brought through the wormholer. I understand you also embedded a lot of fake information about your wife in the mainframe mashina to create a false identity for her."

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"Yes, sir."

"I guess you know that if you sneeze, your head will fall off."

"Yes, sir."

"Anything to say in your own defense?"

"No, sir."

"Then Colonel Yost will show you something you've never seen in all your years with the Security Forces — the inside of a cell in Special Investigations. If it turns out you've lied to me about anything whatever you'll be sent to shosho and then bow to the laser. Clear?"

"Yes, sir."

Maks was conscious that the routine which followed was gentler than normal. Being strip-searched was demeaning, but at least he didn't have to stand at attention for six hours with bare feet in a pan of icewater and his nose touching a wall. Wearing paper pajamas, he was put into a narrow holding cell, but at least he wasn't wearing a kang. Nobody punched, kicked, or jabbed him with an electric prod. By Special Investigation standards, it was almost a vacation.

At first he slept — impossible to say for how long. Then, during the long, long hours that ensued he had plenty of time to reflect on what a mess he'd made of his life. He had time to imagine torture, and that was only less harrowing than torture itself. He had time to remember Maia and Sherí and to wonder when or if ever he'd see his son again. He had time to imagine the life he might have lived if he'd done this, that, or the other thing instead of what he actually had done.

If.

In the narrow, cold cell the ghosts of people alive and dead crowded around him, and his own ghost, the image of the man he now never would be but might have been if he hadn't been such a goddamn fool, haunted him most insistently of all. The man who might have quit the Security Forces and taken his wife and son to live on some offworld where hard work and common sense meant more than brilliant scheming. The man who might have —

Without warning the steel door grated outward and Yost's pale face, like the face on the crescent moon, looked down at him. His eyes were expressionless as craters. With him were two of his thuggi carrying black duroplast batons.

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"Come along," he said quietly, and Maks, all his joints feeling rusted, creaked to his feet. The thuggi took him by both arms and helped him shamble along. He didn't breathe easily until they had left Special Operations.

At the general's office he was thrust inside and the door closed behind him. Yamashita sat in his usual place. Several silent minutes passed before something odd about him caught Maks's attention.

Usually a culprit standing before Yamashita was impaled by his gaze like a moth on a pin. Now he seemed to be hardly looking at Maks. Looking through him, rather. Looking at something, or at nothing, occupying empty space behind him.

When he spoke at last, his words were absolutely unexpected.

"You remind me in some ways of my friend the Worldsaver," Yamashita said.

His voice was strong but strangely distant. He was remembering the incomprehensible past — time traveling, so to speak.

"Like you, Steffens Aleksandr was gifted but erratic. He ruined himself, lost his career in the Security Forces. And what's a man without a career? A walking corpse. Yet in spite of that he became the Worldsaver, though exactly how I never understood."

He paused, brooding.

"What gets me about you and him both is the way unexpected results develop from your stupid fucking blunders. I guess it makes sense in terms of the Great Tao, but it makes no goddamn sense to me. Take this kid, Khamr Dzhon."

He gave John Hammer's name the Alspeke way, growled deep in the throat and with the last name first.

"He's in the dispensary, still out. I had the *mediki* run his DNA through the mainframe like we did the other stari. I was checking your statement, making sure he was who you said he was. Only instead of just doing statistics like before, I told them to check for individual relationships. Didn't tell them what relationships, because I didn't want them finding what they thought the general wanted instead of what was there.

"Well, those goddamn white mice in the lab, they turned up an amazing thing. An almost unbelievable thing. This boy's not only Benjo's son, the two of them are ancestors of people now living."

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"John Hammer survives the Troubles? But how? Washington was totally destroyed in the war."

Yamashita sighed. "If you weren't so goddamn slow on the uptake, Maks, you'd realize that we don't send him back to Washington. We send him someplace else, like Luna, where he survives and grows up and starts a family."

"Why? Whose ancestor is he?"

"Mine, for one," said Yamashita. "Benjo didn't just beget a son. He started a whole family of motherfuckers. And you're looking at one of them."

Yamashita took a deep breath. "Since by violating regulations and bringing this boy into the present time where we could save his life you accidentally made it possible for me to exist and my children and their children, I guess I owe you something. So here's your life. And since you seem to have this weird fucking genius for doing important things, you can even keep your job.

"But from here on out, you'll be on a leash. You'll be injected with a neurotoxin pellet. I alone will have the activating code and if you ever break the rules again, if you so much as spit on the goddamn floor, I'll show you what it feels like to have your whole body come to a stop all at once. I'll show you what it's like to stand there for a microsecond, a dead man waiting to fall.

"Any questions?"

WHEN MAKS RETURNED to Special Operations with his discharge order, Yost congratulated him.

He lingered while Maks put on his uniform, including his major's insignia. Yost was puzzled, but since Maks didn't volunteer to explain his survival, he politely avoided comment.

For his part, Maks couldn't decide whether Yost was glad or sorry he didn't have to put him through shosho. They made brief arrangements for Maks to take John Hammer to Luna through the wormholer. They agreed that the appearance of a strange boy in that small colony would cause comment. But minor mysteries would be forgotten when the Earth exploded into the Time of Troubles.

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Then they parted, neither man comprehending the other.

In his small, cluttered office, Yost sat for a while silent at his desk. How the devil had Maks gotten the General to set him free? Why were they sending this boy to Luna? Because he had no need to know, Yost hadn't been told.

Still, he'd accomplished the main thing. Ending Maks's special relationship with the General, eliminating him as a possible rival in the future. The thing he'd been angling for ever since Pali first came to him and told him about Benjo's ridiculous proposal to exchange data on the ancient treasure vaults for help in saving his son from Troubles.

What an idiot, Pali had said. *Can you imagine his arrogance? You'd think we were his prisoners instead of the other way around!*

How does he propose to make Major Hastings bring this boy forward? Yost had asked.

I've been letting Hastings's wife in to see Benjo as you advised, Honored Colonel. Well, Sherí told him that Hastings has a son living with his previous wife. So he wants us to kidnap this kid and hold him to ransom!

Even Yost had enjoyed a good chuckle over that one. And then he'd shocked Pali by saying coolly, *Why not? I'll send over a few trustworthy guys. We'll put maximum pressure on Hastings and he'll dig himself in deeper and deeper. You do want to get your well-deserved promotion to head Pastplor, don't you, Pali?*

Yes, Honored Colonel.

Well, you manage this well, and I can promise you that whenever I succeed Yamashita, you'll find that Pastplor was only the beginning.

Before resuming work, Yost permitted himself one of his bleak smiles. By now Pali and everybody else involved was dead — Pali fingered as the villain, the others as his accomplices. Sandi was supposed to be found dead, but the two thuggi Yost had sent to kill him had been done in by the Darksider. Admittedly that was a glitch, totally unexpected. But Yost had taken good care all along that the boy never saw anyone but his keepers, and in the end it didn't matter.

Yost was sorry to lose the men he'd sacrificed. People he'd trained himself. Good subordinates were worth a lot.

But keeping open his path to succeed the General as Chief of Security

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was worth much more. Anybody who ever worked in a bureaucracy would understand that.

MAKS HAD NO TROUBLE getting Maia and Sandi into Pastplor. He brought them in, tagged as visitors, just before the end of an evening guard rotation, and later deleted the memory from the guard station mashina.

In the transport room he prepared them with faked IDs, money, and clothing of the ancient world.

"You know what to do, Maia?" he asked her a dozen times, and she patiently answered yes.

Sandi was squirming in Maks's arms. He didn't understand why he had to be held like a little kid, but Maks gripped him strongly.

"Oh, Maks, you're sure you can't come, too?"

"No. I've got — well, you might say I've caught something. A kind of bug. It's circulating in my system somewhere, and I can't go because of it. If I came with you I'd soon be dead, and I'd be no good to you then."

She touched John Hammer's cheek. He slept on the metal slide, an IV in his wrist, a bottle of nutrient solution taped to his arm.

"Are we going somewhere?" asked Sandi.

"Yes. You're going to be a timesurfer, just like I am."

The boy stopped wriggling. "Really?"

"Yes. If it's a little while before I join you, you won't forget me, will you, son?"

"N-no."

As he helped them onto the slide, he told Maia, "Watch out for John Hammer when you get there. He's a mean kid. He won't remember this place, but he'll be plenty confused. And he's already learned to be hostile."

Maia clung to Maks's hand. "You will come if you can?"

"Yes. When I can. What was that ancient poet named Snow or Ice or something — you used to bore me reading his verses — "

"Oh, you mean Frost."

"There was something about two roads — "

"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood."

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"That was it. Now lie back and cover your eyes. Sandi, do what your mother tells you."

"Good-bye, Maks."

"*Svidanye*, until — until — "

An hour later he was sitting in his office, staring at nothing in particular, when Yost called on the mashina.

"I see you took that boy to Luna," he said.

"You're monitoring my use of the wormholer, Colonel? Somehow I thought you might be."

"At the general's orders, you understand. I don't think he trusts you as he used to. But look here, Hastings, that's no reason to wear such a grim face. After all, a lot of people were out to get you, and yet you survived."

"Oh, did I?" asked the hollow man, thinking again of everything he'd lost. "Are you sure of that, Colonel? Did I?"

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

MORK MEETS THE SNAKE PIT, AND OTHER FAMILIAR TALES

IT IS NO accident, I think, that the term for a "creature from another planet" and the term for a human who originated from across some artificial boundary line on our very own Earth is the same: *Alien*.

It all comes down to our perception of another being as foreign — substantially different from ourselves.

Whether difference is a good thing or a threat has always depended on who you talk to and the prevailing winds of the public sentiment of the day. In human relations, "multiculturalism" and "tolerance" are two words bandied about widely these days. Lessons on acceptance and inclusion are regularly featured in television programming, and daily taught in school. Yet hate groups have never been more widespread or virulent. And as for the prevailing winds, since September of 2001, they have carried, in the U.S., the smoldering scent of death and destruction, and the possibility of invisible contagion.

One can't help but wonder what this will all mean for Hollywood film.

For creatures from other worlds have always had, in American movies, allegorical power to reflect our Earthly social attitudes. Their depiction is usually less than subtle, and full of Christian imagery. Some are demonic. Others messianic. During the dawn of the Cold War, in the shadow of the HUAC witch hunts, scary creature features expressed our paranoia — not always overtly amidst the strident optimism of the fifties — about political threats and atomic horrors. Still, in this same environment, one of

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my favorite alien flicks, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) was released. Here, the alien is a savior in a shiny jumpsuit. Of course, Michael Rennie, with his lean, debonair looks, and his tasteful British accent, was just the kind of intergalactic peace envoy to inspire confidence. Too bad the intolerant, militaristic humanoids still wanted to do him in.

In another post-war era, after Vietnam, social attitudes were even more confused — all that leftover peace and love from the sixties, mixed with the startling realization that not everyone in the world loved the good ole US of A. (The 1979-80 Iranian hostage "crisis" did great psychic damage specifically because we could no longer deny that some of our global brethren saw us as heathens and devils.) Therefore, cinematic space visitors vacillated wildly between the touchie-feelie aliens of Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters* (1977) and *E.T.* (1982) and the literal "enemy from within" phobic gross-outs of the *Alien* (1979+) franchise.

It's been a mixed bag for years. Sometimes within the same movie. In the mishmash that was Brian DePalma's *Mission to Mars* (2000), horrific violence and dread inexplicably transform into a "We Are Family" lovefest at the film's conclusion. Go figure. If you can.

I can hardly wait to see what will happen in the next few years of Hollywood sf film. If I were a betting woman, I would wager that — after the dust settles — for every angelic, paternalistic alien (e.g., *Contact*, 1997) Hollywood offers us, we'll be forced to watch three evil alien empires (e.g., *ID4*, 1996) that will be gloriously defeated by a whole lotta red, white, and blue whoop-ass.

While we wait, we can enjoy, in a modest way, an example of the warm and fuzzy school (so soothing in these troubled times) that elevates itself well above the mediocre quality of its story, through excellent performances and solid direction.

The film is *K-PAX*. It is directed by Iain Softley *(Hackers, Wings of the Dove)*, and written by Charles Leavitt *(The Mighty)*, based — fairly closely — on the 1995 first novel of the same name by Gene Brewer.

I always think that it's a very bad sign when an entertainment can be easily summed up by one of those dreaded "meets" similes. Yet *K-PAX*, the book and the movie, has repeatedly been described in this way by both professional critics and

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the general public. It's *Starman* Meets *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, Cocoon* Meets *12 Monkeys, My Favorite Martian* Meets *Awakenings*. Take your pick.

But more than anything else *K-PAX* is suspiciously like an Argentinean film from 1986 called *Man Facing Southeast*. That movie, written and directed by Eliseo Subiela, tells the story of a compassionate and observant creature, here called Rantes (Hugo Soto), who claims to be a visitor from another world. Brought to the attention of an overworked and burnt-out psychiatrist with a troubled family life, Rantes is tested and studied, and assumed to be brilliant but delusional. However, certain events seem to indicate that the patient is telling the truth. Rantes appears to be, at the very least, a benign figure, who not only comforts the other asylum inmates, but also prods the doctor to think about his attitudes and values.

Man Facing Southeast isn't exactly feel-good fluff. As a relatively early post-junta film, it paints a rather bleak view of human (in this case, Argentine) society. Christ-like Rantes is moved to feed the hungry and comfort the oppressed. And he can't understand why his shrink, Dr. Denis (Lorenzo Quinteros), isn't similarly moved to act. Instead, calling himself a "Pilate of the Galaxies," the Doctor, fearing for his job, sides with hospital authorities and allows Rantes to be brutalized by mind-killing drugs and tortured with shock treatments. The savior figure is crucified by social control and silence. At times slow, and, for many, overly religious in tone, *Man Facing Southeast* is nonetheless a moving and thought-provoking science fiction film.

If you peeled away a bit of the Christian symbolism, added an extra psychological twist, and gave it a much more upbeat tone (better suited to [North] American cultural tastes, or lack thereof) you would have *K-PAX*.

I'd like to claim all this as an expose scoop. But movie buffs have seen the similarity between the two works since the day Mr. Brewer's novel was published. (See, for example, the *Kirkus* review of January 1, 1995.) And when the movie trailer for *K-PAX* hit theaters, a few months before its release, even more folks wondered about this U.S. "remake" of a South American cult film. I wanted to test my own recollections, so I hunted down a rental copy of Mr. Subiela's film. And when I showed up at my area's

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best-stocked video store to pick it up, the clerk said "You're watching this because of that *K-PAX* remake, right?" And that was before the Universal release even hit theaters!

"Remake" implies an acknowledged source material, of course. But if there was any nod given to *Man Facing Southeast* by either the novel or the movie of *K-PAX*, I sure did miss it, even though I studied the credits and production notes quite carefully. Perhaps the paranoia of the times is getting to me. I'm becoming a conspiracy theorist in my old age. Then again, maybe it's all a coincidence. There are a limited number of plots in this world, after all. And in a day where Hollywood goes out of its way to find a high (that is, derivative) concept for every movie it makes, and many novelists do the same, it was only a matter of time before *Mork & Mindy* met the *Snake Pit*, I suppose.

For the above reason, I must admit that I was predisposed to dislike *K-PAX*. I had prejudged it to be unoriginal — or worse. Still, the only fair thing to do is to judge a movie on its own merits or shortcomings. So, let me take a moment here to damn the film with faint praise. As a cinematic fable, it actually works.

Iain Softley's direction keeps the pace of the story up, while not resorting to inappropriate use of special effects, and seldom pandering to the sentimental aspects of the plot. Mr. Leavitt's lean and effective screenplay makes one crucial and important change from the book. The psychiatrist hero is no longer named (like the book's author) Gene Brewer. He is now named Dr. Mark Powell, and is a more complex character, although still in keeping with the stereotype of the workaholic yuppie who needs to adjust his priorities.

The fact that the character of Dr. Powell doesn't strike the viewer as a stock character has less to do with writing than it does with the skill of the actor in the role. Jeff Bridges is one of Hollywood's most underappreciated actors. (I know awards are bull doody, but, galdarnit, this guy has never won an Oscar!) The reason, I think, is his bland good looks, and his incredible talent for making every character seem so natural that he must just be playing himself. Take a look at the range, though. From *The Last Picture Show* to *American Heart* to *The Big Lebowski* to his terrific turn as the President in 2000's *The Contender*, Jeff Bridges is a first-rate film actor.

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Kevin Spacey, who plays the "alien," prot, is no slouch, either. (And has two Academy Awards to prove it.) But, you know, Spacey, although gifted, has a tendency to let his Ac-Ting show. And his knowing smirk has been known to get on my nerves. Luckily, a knowing smirk is completely appropriate for his current role, as a gentle fellow who claims to be from a superior civilization, on a Utopian planet, several thousand light years from Earth.

Prot says that he is just visiting. And although he has the ability to transport himself at tachyon speeds any time he wants, he somehow seems content to be locked up in the Psychiatric Institute of Manhattan, under the care of a dedicated (but family-neglecting) doctor, during his current visit to our planet.

While institutionalized, prot has an almost miraculous effect on the other sad souls on his ward. One by one, the patients seem to blossom and heal, not from Dr. Powell's treatment, but rather from prot's presence in their lives. The film makes good use of a score of skilled character actors in the roles of patients and staff. All the parts are woefully underwritten, of course. But these characters are less people than elaborate set decoration to allow the growing relationship between the Doctor and his alien patient to shine.

The wasting of good acting chops is standard operating procedure in Hollywood. So, normally I am philosophical about it. In *K-PAX*, it works against the film in some instances, as when Prot picks the most undeveloped of the patient characters to supposedly take back with him to *K-PAX* — leaving the viewer to wonder why. I also found myself asking why-why-why regarding the criminal neglect of one of the film's so-called "stars," Alfre Woodard. That wonderful actor is given third billing in the credits, yet is relegated to a glorified walk-on in the final cut of the movie. (Tell me that Alfre isn't destined to waste herself in those countless, and utterly thankless, administrator and judge roles that Hollywood doles out to meet minority quotas.... Please.)

Still, this film sinks or swims on the ability of the two male leads to relate in interesting ways with one another. And it's the talents of Bridges and Spacey that make this story work, despite an imitative plot full of otherwise half-realized characters. The movie always keeps our interest because of the

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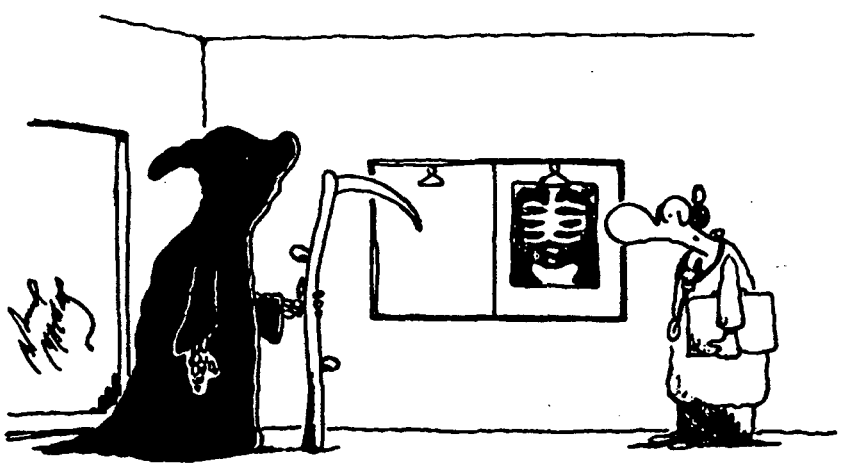
interplay between Powell and prot, as the Doctor alternates between belief in alien visitation, and his professional hunch that Prot is simply a human repressing a past trauma.

Generally speaking, *K-PAX* actually works better as a film than as a novel. And it's not often you can say that! Still, it's interesting to note precisely what's been jettisoned from the book. Prot's politics have largely been expunged. Movie viewers hear little of his gentle anarchism, full of a profound dislike of religion and all social controls. And they hear even less about his passionate vegetarianism (mirrored by the fervent views of one of the Doctor's children, a human animal activist). In the film, prot's preference for fruit is simply labeled a "healthy" lifestyle choice at a family picnic he attends.

That's one of the many ways *K-PAX* (the movie) plays it safe and predictable. And that's why, despite the outstanding work of two of Hollywood's finest, I can't necessarily recommend the film. Although I would certainly never try to dissuade anyone from seeing it.

Except, perhaps, Eliseo Subiela of Argentina, a filmmaker who isn't afraid of serious issues and thoroughly downbeat endings. Mr. Subiela should probably avoid this film, so like his own. That is, unless he wants to bring his lawyer along.



"Who's the babe?"

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There are several constants in the manuscripts submitted to our magazine: each week we probably receive as many hackneyed stories about deals with the Devil as Messrs. Boucher and McComas received in the late 1940s. But there are also changes to the submissions, and these can be more interesting to note. In recent years, it seems that the one subject that has cropped up most often is neither alien invasion nor cybernetics. It's memory. Mnemosyne was the mother of the muses and she seems to be having her day, thanks perhaps to the wonders of gingko biloba. Maureen McHugh's new story takes on the subject of memory directly with a very affecting tale of what could be the very near future.

Presence

By Maureen F. McHugh

MILA SITS AT HER DESK IN Ohio and picks up the handle of the new disposable razor in...Shen Zhen, China? Juarez, Mexico? She can't remember where they're assembling the parts. She pans left and right and decides it must be Shen Zhen, because when she looks around there's no one else in camera range. There's a twelve-hour time-zone difference. It's eleven at night in China, so the only other activity is another production engineer doing telepresence work — waldos sorting through a bin of hinge joints two tables over in a pool of light. Factories are dim and dirty places, but cameras need light, so telepresence stations are islands in the darkness.

She lifts the dark blue plastic part in front of the CMM and waits for it to measure the cavity. She figures they're running about twenty percent out of spec, but they are so far behind on the razor product launch they can't afford to have the vendor resupply, so tomorrow, underpaid Chinese employees in Shen Zhen raw materials will have to hand-inspect the parts, discard the bad ones and send the rest to packaging.

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Her phone rings.

She disengages the waldos and the visor. The display is her home number and she winces.

"Hello?" says her husband, Gus. "Hello, who is this?"

"It's Mila," she says. "It's Mila, honey."

"Mila?" he says. "That's what the Speed Dial said. Where are you?"

"I'm at work," she says.

"At P&G?" he says.

"No, honey, now I work for Gillette. You worked for Gillette, too."

"I did not," he says, suspicious. Gus has Alzheimer's. He is fifty-seven.

"Where's Cathy?" Mila asks.

"Cathy?" his voice lowers. "Is that her name? I was calling because she was here. What is she doing in our house?"

"She's there to help you," Mila says helplessly. Cathy is the new home health. She's been watching Gus during the day for almost three weeks now, but Gus still calls to ask who she is.

"She's black," Gus says. "Not that it matters. Is she from the neighborhood? Is she Dan's friend?" Dan is their son. He's twenty-five and living in Boulder.

"Are you hungry?" Mila asks. "Cathy can make you a sandwich. Do you want a sandwich?"

"I don't need help," Gus says, "Where's my car? Is it in the shop?"

"Yes," Mila says, seizing on the excuse.

"No it's not," he says. "You're lying to me. There's a woman here, some strange woman, and she's taken my car."

"No, baby," Mila says. "You want me to come home for lunch?" It's eleven, she could take an early lunch. Not that she really wants to go home if Gus is agitated.

Gus hangs up the phone.

Motherfucker. She grabs her purse.

Cathy is standing at the door, holding her elbows. Cathy is twenty-five and Gus is her first assignment from the home healthcare agency. Mila likes her, likes even her beautifully elaborate long, polished fingernails. "Mrs. Schuster? Mr. Schuster is gone. I was going to follow his

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minder but he took my locater. I'm sorry, it was in my purse and I never thought he'd take it out — "

"Oh, Jesus," Mila says. She runs upstairs and gets her minder from her bedside table. She flicks it on and it says that Gus is within 300 meters. The indicator arrow says he's headed away from Glenwood, where all the traffic is, and down toward the dead end or even the pond.

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Schuster," Cathy says.

"He's not far," Mila says. "It's not your fault. He's cunning."

They go down the front steps. Cathy is so young. So unhappy right now, still nervously hugging her elbows as if her ribs hurt. Her fingernails are pink with long sprays like rays from a sunrise on each nail. She trails along behind Mila, scuffing in her cute flats. She's an easy girl, usually unflustered. Mila had so hoped that Gus would like her.

Gus is around the corner toward the dead end. He's in the side yard of someone's house Mila doesn't know — thank God that nobody is ever home in the daytime except kids. He's squatting in a flower garden and he has his pants down, she can see his hairy thighs. She hopes he isn't shitting on his pants. Behind him, pale pink hollyhocks rise in spikes.

"Gus!" she calls.

He waves at her to go away.

"Gus," she says. Cathy is still trailing her. "Gus, what are you doing?"

"Can't a man go to the bathroom in peace?" he says, and he sounds so much like himself that if she weren't used to all the craziness she might have burst into tears.

She doesn't cry. She doesn't care. That's when she decides it all has to stop. Because she just doesn't care.

"It is sometimes possible to cure Alzheimer's, it's just not possible to cure the person who has Alzheimer's," the treatment info explains. "We can fix the brain and replace the damaged neurons with new brain but we can't replace the memories that are gone." It's the way Alzheimer's has been all along, Mila thinks, a creeping insidious disease that takes away the person you knew and leaves this angry, disoriented stranger. The video goes on to explain how the treatment — which is nearly completely effective in only about thirty percent of cases, but which arrests the

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progress of the disease in ninety percent of the cases and provides some functional improvement in almost all cases — cannot fix the parts of the brain that have been destroyed.

Mila is a quality engineer. This is a place she is accustomed to, a place of percentages and estimations, of statements of certainty about large groups, and only guesses about particular individuals. She can translate it, "We can promise you everything, we just can't promise it will happen to Gus."

Gus is gone anyway, except in odd moments of habit.

When Gus was diagnosed they had talked about whether or not they should try this treatment. They had sat at the kitchen table, a couple of engineers, and looked at this carefully. Gus had said no. "In five years," he'd said, "there's a good chance the Alzheimer's will come back. So then we'll have spent all this money on a treatment that didn't do any good and where will you be then?"

In some people it reverses in five years. But they've only been doing it for seven years, so who knows?

Gus had diagrammed the benefits. At very best he would be cured. Most likely they would only have spent a lot of money to slow the disease down. "And even if I'm cured, the disease could come roaring back," he'd said. "I don't think I want to have this disease for a long time. I know I don't want to have it twice."

His hands are small for a man, which sounds dainty but isn't. His hands are perfect, the nails neat and smooth, but he hadn't been fussy. He'd been deft with a pencil, had been good at engineering drawings before they did them on computer, and his diagram of benefits and liabilities on a piece of computer paper had been neat. "Don't cry," he'd said.

Gus couldn't handle it when she cried. For the thirty years of their marriage, when she'd had to cry — which was always at night, at least in her memory — she'd gone downstairs after he'd gone to sleep and sat on the couch and cried. She would have liked him to comfort her, but in marriage you learn what other people's limits are. And you learn your own.

For the cost of her house, she can have them put an enzyme in Gus's brain that will scrub out the Alzheimic plaque that has replaced so much of his neural structure. And then they will put in undifferentiated cells

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and a medium called Transglycyn and that medium will contain a virus that tells the DNA within the cells to create neurons and grow him a new brain.

She calls Dan in Boulder.

"I thought you and Dad didn't want to do this," Dan says.

"I thought so, too," she says. "But I didn't know what it would be like."

Dan is silent. Digital silence. You can hear a pin drop silence. "Do you want me to come home?" he asks.

"No," she says. "No, you stay out there. You just started your job." Dan is a chef. He studied at the Culinary Institute of America, and spent a couple of years as a line chef in the Four Seasons in New York. Now Etienne Corot is opening a new restaurant in Boulder called, of course, "Corot," and Dan has gotten a job as sous-chef. It's a promotion. The next step in making a name for himself, so that someday he can open his own restaurant.

"You need to keep your eye on Schuster's," she says. It's an old joke between them, that he's going to open a four-star restaurant called Schuster's. They both agree that Schuster's sounds like a Big Boy franchise.

"'Artesia,'" he says.

"Is that it?" she asks.

"That's the latest name," he says. They have been trading names for the restaurant he will someday open since he started at the Culinary Institute. "You like it?"

"As long as I don't think about the cattle town in New Mexico."

"No shit," he says, and she can imagine him at the other end of the phone, ducking his head the way his dad does. Dan is an inch taller than Gus, with the same long legs and arms. Unfortunately, he got her father's hairline and already, at twenty-five, his bare temples make her tender and protective.

"I can fly out," he says.

"It's not like surgery," she says, suddenly irritated. She wants him to fly out, but there isn't any point in it. "And I'd get tired of us sitting there holding hands for the next three months while they eradicate the plaque, because as far as you and I will be able to tell, nothing will be happening."

"Okay," he says.

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"Dan," she says. "I feel as if I'm spending your money."

"I don't care about the money. I don't like to talk about it that way, anyway," he says. "I just feel weird because Dad said not to do it."

"I know," she says. "But I don't feel as if this person is your dad anymore."

"It won't be Dad when it's done, will it?" Dan says.

"No," Mila says. "No, but at least maybe it will be a person who can take care of himself."

"Look, Mom," he says, his voice serious and grown-up. "You're there. You're dealing with it every day. You do what you have to do. Don't worry about me."

She feels tears well up in her eyes. "Okay, honey," she says. "Well, you've got stuff you need to do."

"Call me if you want me to come out," he says.

She wants him off the phone before she cries. "I will," she says.

"Love you, Mom," he says.

She knows he can tell she was crying.

"I'm not sick," Gus says.

"It's a check-up," Mila says.

Gus sits on the examining room table in his shorts and T-shirt. It used to be that she said the litany of what she loved when she saw him like this —his nose, his blue eyes made to look the distance, the hollow of his collar bone, his long legs. Show me your butt, she'd say, and he'd turn and shake it at her and they'd cackle like children.

"We've waited long enough," Gus says.

"It's not that long," Mila says, and at that moment the doctor knocks and opens the door. With him is a technician, a black woman, with a cart.

"Who are you?" Gus says.

"I'm Dr. Feingold." He is patient, is Dr. Feingold. He met with them for an hour yesterday and he talked with them for a few minutes this morning before Gus had his blood work. But Gus doesn't remember. Gus was worse than usual. They are in Atlanta for the procedure. Lexington, Kentucky, and Windsor, Ontario, both have clinics that do the procedures, but Dr. Feingold had worked with Raymond Miller, the Ph.D. who originated the treatment. So she picked Atlanta.

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Gus is agitated. "You're not my doctor," he says.

Dr. Feingold says, "I'm a specialist, Mr. Schuster. I'm going to help you with your memory problems."

Gus looks at Mila.

"It's true," she says.

"You're trying to hurt me," Gus says. "In fact, you're going to kill me, aren't you?"

"No, honey," she says. "You're sick. You have Alzheimer's. I'm trying to help you."

"You've been poisoning me," Gus says. Is it because he's scared? Because everything is so strange?

"Do you want to get dressed?" Dr. Feingold says. "We can try this in an hour."

"I don't want to try anything," Gus says. He stands up. He's wearing white athletic socks and he has the skinny calves of an old man. The disease has made him much older than fifty-seven. In a way she is killing him. Gus will never come back and now she's going to replace him with a stranger.

"Take some time," Dr. Feingold says. Mila has never been to a doctor's office where the doctor wasn't scheduled to death. But then again, she's never paid $74,000 for a doctor's visit, which is what today's injection of brain scrubbing Transglycyn will cost. Not really just the visit and the Transglycyn. They'll stay here two more days and Gus will be monitored.

"God damn," Gus says, sitting back down. "God damn you all."

"All right, Mr. Schuster," Dr. Feingold says.

The technician pushes the cart over and Dr. Feingold says, "I'm going to give you an injection, Mr. Schuster."

"God damn," Gus says again. Gus never much said "God damn" before.

The Transglycyn with the enzyme is supposed to be injected in the spine but Dr. Feingold takes a hypodermic and gives Gus a shot in the crook of his arm.

"You just lie there a moment," Dr. Feingold says.

Gus doesn't say anything.

"Isn't it supposed to be in his back?" Mila says.

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"It is," Dr. Feingold says, "but right now I want to reduce his agitation. So I've given him something to calm him."

"You didn't say anything about that," she says.

"I don't want him to change his mind while we're giving him the enzyme. This will relax him and make him compliant."

"Compliant," she says. She's supposed to complain, they're drugging him and they didn't tell her they would. But she's pretty used to him not being compliant. Compliant sounds good. It sounds excellent. "Is it a tranquilizer?" she asks.

"It's a new drug," Dr. Feingold says. He is writing it down on Gus's chart. "Most tranquilizers can further agitate patients with Alzheimer's."

"I have Alzheimer's," Gus says. "It makes me agitated. But sometimes I know it."

"Yes, Mr. Schuster," Dr. Feingold says. "You do. This is Vicki. Vicki is someone who helps me with this all the time, and we're very good at doing it, but when we roll you on your side, I need you to lie very still, all right?"

Gus, who hated when doctors patronized him, says dopily, "All right." Gus, who during a colonoscopy, higher than a kite on Demerol, asked his doctor if they had gotten to the ileum, because even with his brain cradled in opiates, Gus just liked to *know*.

Vicki and Dr. Feingold roll Gus onto his side.

"Are you comfortable, Mr. Schuster?" Vicki asks. She has a down-home Atlanta accent.

Dr. Feingold goes out the door. He comes back in with two more people, both men, and they put a cushion behind Gus's knees so it's hard for him to roll over, and then another cushion at the back of his neck.

"Are you all right, Mr. Schuster?" Dr. Feingold asks. "Are you comfortable?"

"Okay," Gus says, fuzzy.

Vicki pulls his undershirt up and exposes his knobby backbone. Dr. Feingold marks a place with a black pen. He feels Gus's back like a blind woman, his face absent with concentration, and then he takes a needle and says, "There will be a prick, Mr. Schuster. This will make the skin on your back numb, okay?" He gives Gus another shot.

Gus says "Ow" solemnly.

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And then Dr. Feingold and Vicki make some marks with the pen. Then there is another needle, and Dr. Feingold makes a careful injection in Gus's back. He leaves the needle in a moment, pulls the part of the hypodermic out that had medication in it, and Vicki takes it and gives him another one and he puts that in the hypodermic and injects it.

Mila isn't sure if that's more painkiller or the Transglycyn.

"Okay, Mr. Schuster," Dr. Feingold says. "We're done with the medicine. But you lie still for a few minutes."

"Is it like a spinal tap?" Mila asks. "Will he get a headache?"

Dr. Feingold shakes his head. "No, Mrs. Schuster, that's it. When he feels like sitting up, he can."

So now it is inside him. Soon it will start eating the plaque in his brain.

The places it will eat clean were not Gus anymore, anyway. It's not as if Gus is losing anything more. It bothers her, though, the Transglycyn goo moving along the silver-gray pathways of his neurons, dissolving the Swiss cheese damage of the disease. And then, what, there are gaps in his head? Fluid-filled gaps in his brain, the tissue porous as a sponge and poor Gus, shambling along, angry and desperate.

She wants to stroke his poor head. But he is quiet now, sedated, and maybe it's best to let him be.

THE CLINIC IS more like a hotel than a hospital, the bed has a floral bedspread and over it is a painting of cream and peach roses in a vase. After being sedated during the day, Gus is restless. He will not go to bed. If she goes to bed he'll try to go out into the hall, but the door is locked from the inside so he can't get out. There's a touchpad next to the door and she's used 0815, Dan's birthday, as the code. She doesn't think Gus knows Dan's birthday anymore. A sign on the door says, IN CASE OF FIRE, ALL DOORS WILL OPEN AUTOMATICALLY. Gus runs his fingers along the crack between the door and the wall. "I want to go out," he says, and she says that he can't. "I want to go out," he says, and she says, "We're not home, we have to stay here."

"I want to go out," he says, again and again, long after she stops answering him. He finally sits and watches five minutes of television but then he gets up and goes back to the door. "Let's go home," he says this

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time, and when she doesn't answer, he runs his long fingers like spiders up and down the edge of the door. He sits, he gets up and stands at the door for minutes, twenty, thirty minutes at a time, until she is blind with fatigue and her eyes burn with tears and she finally shrieks, "There's no way out!"

For a moment he looks at her, befuddled. The he turns back to the door and says querulously, "I want to go out."

At one point she goes to him and folds both his hands in hers and says, "We're both trapped." She is dizzy with fatigue but if she cries he will just get worse. He looks at her and then goes back to searching the door, moth fingers fluttering. She turns out the light and he howls, "Oww-ow-oww-ow — " until she snaps the light back on.

Finally, she shoves past him and locks him in the room. She goes down to the lounge and sits on a couch, pulling her bare feet up and tucking them under her nightgown. The lounge is deserted. She thinks about sleeping here for a few hours. She feels vacant and exposed. She leans her head back and closes her eyes and there is the distant white noise of the ventilation system and the strange audible emptiness of a big room and she can feel her brain swooping instantly into a kind of nightmare where she is sliding into sleep thinking someone is sick and she needs to do something and when she jerks awake her whole body feels a flush of exhaustion.

She can't stay here. Is Gus howling in the room?

When she opens the door he is standing there, but she has the odd feeling he may not have noticed she was gone.

He finally lets her talk him into lying down around 3:15 in the morning but he is up again a little after six.

She asks the next day if it is the stuff they've injected, but of course, it's not. It's the strangeness. The strange room, the strange place, the Alzheimer's, the ruin of his brain.

The social worker suggests that until they are ready to insert the cellular material and stimulate neural growth, Gus should go to a nursing facility for elderly with dementia.

Even if she could afford it, Mila thinks she would have to say no. When they resculpt his brain, he will be a different person, but she will still be married to him, and she wants to stay with him and to be part of

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the whole process, so that maybe her new husband, the new Gus, will still be someone she loves. Or at least someone she can be married to.

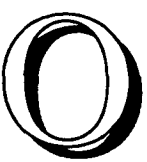
Mila is lucky they can afford this. It is an experimental treatment so insurance doesn't cover the cost. She and Gus have money put away for retirement from his parents and hers, but she can't touch that or capital gains taxes will go off, as her accountant says, like a time bomb. But they can sell their house.

The old house sells for $217,000. The first half of the treatment is about $74,000. The second half of the treatment is a little over $38,000. Physical therapy is expected to cost a little over $2,100 a month. Home health is $32,000 through an agency (insurance will no longer pay because this is an experimental treatment). That doesn't include airfare and a thousand incidentals. At least the house is paid off, and the tax man does some finagling and manages to save her $30,000 for a down payment on a little townhouse.

It has two floors, a postage stamp-sized back yard, and monthly maintenance fees of $223 a month. Her mortgage is $739 a month.

It has a living room and kitchen downstairs and two bedrooms upstairs. The carpet is a pale gray, and her living room furniture, which is all rich medieval reds and ochre and ivory, doesn't go well, but it doesn't look bad, either.

"Why is our couch here?" Gus asks plaintively. "When can we go home?"



ONE EVENING WHEN he says he wants to go home she puts him in the car and starts driving. When Dan was a baby, when he wouldn't go to sleep, the sound of a car engine would soothe him, and this evening it seems to have the same effect on Gus. He settles happily into the passenger seat of their seven-year-old Honda sedan, and as she drives he strokes the armrest and croons. She's not sure at first if the crooning means he's agitated, but after a while she decides it's a happy sound.

"You like going for a ride?" she says to him.

He doesn't answer but he keeps on crooning, "ooo-ooo-ooo-ooo."

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Another night she wakes up alone in the bed. Alzheimer's victims don't sleep much. Used to be that if Gus or Dan got up in the night she heard them, but she's pretty tired these days.

She finds him downstairs in the kitchen, taking the bowl of macaroni and cheese out of the refrigerator. It's covered in foil because she's out of plastic wrap. "Are you hungry?" she asks.

Gus says, "I can take care of it." His tone is ordinary and reassuring. He puts the bowl in the microwave.

"You can't put it in the microwave, honey," Mila says. "You have to take the foil off the top first." She hates that she only calls him "honey" when she is exasperated with him, and when she doesn't want to make him angry. It feels passive aggressive. Or something.

Gus closes the microwave door and pushes the time button.

"Gus," she says, "don't do that." She reaches past him and opens the microwave door, and he pushes her away.

"Gus," she says, "don't." She reaches for the door and he pushes her away again.

"Leave it alone," he says.

"You can't," she says. "It's got foil on it." Gus is an engineer, for God's sake. Or was.

She tries to stop him, puts her hand on his forearm, and he turns to face her, his face a grimace of anger, and he pulls his arm back and punches her in the face.

He is still a strong, tall man and the punch knocks her down.

She doesn't even know how to feel it. No one has punched her since she was maybe twelve, and that was a pretty ineffective punch, even if her nose did bleed. It stops her from thinking. She is lying on the kitchen floor. Gus pushes the start button on the microwave.

Mila touches her face. Her lip is cut, she can taste the blood. Her face hurts.

There is a flicker as the microwave arcs. She doesn't have it in her to get up and do anything about it. Gus frowns. Not at her, at the microwave.

Mila sits up and explores her face. One of her teeth feels wobbly to her tongue. Gus doesn't pay any attention, he's watching the microwave. He's intent. It's a parody of the engineer solving a problem.

The microwave starts arcing in earnest and Gus steps back.

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Mila sits on the floor until the microwave starts smoking and only then does she get up. She doesn't even feel like crying, although her mouth and cheek hurt. She pushes cancel on the microwave and then pulls it out of the alcove and unplugs it. She leaves it half pulled out and goes over to the sink and spits bloody saliva. She rinses her mouth and then washes the sink out.

"Go on up to bed," she says.

Gus looks at her. Is he angry? She steps back, out of range. Now she is scared. He's not a child, he's a big man. Is he going to be upset with her because he's still hungry?

"I'll heat you up some soup," she says. "Okay?"

Gus looks away, his mouth a little open.

She grabs an oven mitt, opens the smoking microwave carefully and takes out the macaroni and cheese. The ceramic bowl has cracked in half and the foil is blackened, but she holds it together until she can throw it out. Gus sits down. She takes the microwave outside on the grass. She doesn't think it's burning inside, but she isn't sure. She can't sit and watch it, not with Gus unsupervised. So if it starts to smolder, it starts to smolder. The grass is damp.

Back inside she finds Gus in the living room eating ice cream out of the carton with a serving spoon. There is ice cream on him and on the couch.

She's afraid to go near him, so she sits on a chair and watches him eat.

She cannot shake the feeling that the man in front of her should not be Gus, because the Gus she has been married to would not, would never, hit her. The Gus she was married to had certain characteristics that were inalienable to him — his neatness — almost fussiness. His meticulousness. His desperate need to be good, to be oh so good. But this is still Gus, too. Even as the ice cream drips on his legs and on the couch. What exactly is Gus? What defines Gusness? What is it she married? It is not just this familiar body. There is some of Gus inside, too. Something present that she can't put her finger on, maybe only habits of Gusness.

Later, when he goes up to bed, sticky with ice cream, she throws out the carton even though it is still half full. Outside, the microwave sits inert and smelling faintly of hot appliance. She goes upstairs and goes to bed in the other bedroom.

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She tries to think of what to do. The Transglycyn is eating out the plaque, but he won't start to get better until they replace the neurons and the neurons grow and they don't even go to Atlanta until next month. It will be three months after that before she begins to see any improvement.

The old bastard. Alzheimer's is the bastard.

She doesn't know what to do. She can't even afford a leave of absence at work. Saturday, she thinks, she'll hire a sitter and then she'll rent a hotel room and sleep for a few hours. That will help. She'll think better when she's not so tired.

AT WORK, MILA'S closest friend is Phyllis. Phyllis is also a quality engineer. More and more engineers in QA are women and Phyllis says that's why QA engineers make $10,000 a year less than design and production engineers. "It's like Human Resources," she says. "It's a girl-ghetto of engineering now." "Girl-ghetto" is a little ironic, coming from Phyllis who is five foot two inches, weighs close to two hundred pounds, and who has close-cut iron gray hair.

Phyllis comes by Mila's cubicle at midmorning and says, "So how's the old bastard." Phyllis knew Gus when he was still Gus.

"A real bastard," Mila says and looks up away from the computer monitor, up at Phyllis, the side of her face all morning-glory purple.

"Oh my God!" Phyllis says, "What happened?"

"Gus decked me."

"Oh God," Phyllis says. In the cafeteria, sitting with a cup of coffee in front of her, she says dryly, "You really look quite amazing," which is a relief, because Phyllis's initial shock, her initial speechlessness was almost more than Mila could bear. If Phyllis can't joke about it....

She does not say, "You've got to put him in a home." The other thing Phyllis does say is, "Gus would be appalled."

"He would," Mila says, utterly grateful. "He would, wouldn't he."

They go to the Cleveland Clinic and Gus is anesthetized and some of his bone marrow is extracted. The frozen bone marrow is shipped to Atlanta so they can extract undifferentiated stem cells to inject in him to replace his own missing neurons.

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After the anesthetic he is agitated for two days. His balance is off and his hip hurts where they extracted the bone marrow and he calls her a bitch.

Two weeks later they go to Atlanta and the procedure to inject the undifferentiated cells and virus trigger are almost identical to the first procedure. Gus swings at her twice more; once at the clinic in Atlanta and once back in the townhouse, but she's watching because she's afraid of him now, and she gets out of the way both times. She warns Iris, the new home health. (Cathy left because her boyfriend has a cousin in Tampa who can get him some sort of job.) Iris is in her thirties, heavy and not friendly. Not unfriendly. Iris says Gus never gets that way around her. Is she lying? Mila wonders. And then, why would she?

Is Iris saying that Gus likes Iris better than Mila? Mila always has the feeling that Iris thinks Mila should be home more. That Mila should be taking care of Gus herself.

Gus likes car rides, sometimes. They climb into her car.

"Where are we going?" he asks.

"To therapy," she says. He'll start to get agitated now, she thinks.

But he puts the window down and the trees go past, and he leans his head back and croons.

"Are you happy, Saxophone Man?" Mila says.

Everything is in stasis now — he grows no better but no worse until something happens with the cells they put in his brain. Three months until they see any difference, at the earliest. But now, one month after they injected new cells into his gap-ridden brain, they will do some tests to benchmark.

It all makes perfect sense. Too bad we never benchmark when we're healthy, she thinks. Maybe she should have herself benchmarked. Mila Schuster, cognitive function raw scores at age fifty-one. Then if dementia got her in its jaws, they could chart the whole cycle. Hell, benchmark the whole population, like they benchmark women with mammograms between the ages of forty-five and fifty.

Unless it has already started. She forgets things at work. She knows it is just because she is so worried about Alzheimer's. Senior moments, Allen, one of the home health used to call those times when you stand in the kitchen and can't remember what you came for.

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If she got Alzheimer's, who would take care of her? She and Gus would end up in an institution, both in diapers and unaware of each other.

Gus croons.

"Saxophone Man," she says. There is something dear to her about the ruined Gus, even through all the fear and the anger and the dismay. This great ruin of a fine brain. This engineer who could so often put his finger on a problem and say, "There. That's it. The higher the strength of the plastic in the handle, the more brittle it is. You want to back off on the strength a bit and let the thing flex or it's going to shatter. Particularly if it sits in sunlight and the UV starts breaking down the plastic."

What a marvelous brain you had, she thinks. You'd say it and I'd see it, everybody would see it, obvious then. But everything is obvious once you see it.

The therapy is done at a place called Baobab Tree Rehab in a strip shopping mall. The anchor store in the mall is a Sears Hardware, which is Sears with just tools. Inside, Baobab Tree Rehab is like insurance companies and mortgage companies — there are ficus trees in pots in front of the windows, and rat's maze cubicles like there are in older office buildings. Once, years before, Gus was walking with Mila at work when suddenly he crouched a bit so he was her height — she is five three — and said, it really is a maze for you. That was the first time she realized he could see over the tops of the cubicles, and so they didn't really work like walls for him.

Gus is looking over the cubicles now, too.

Their therapist is young. She comes out to meet them. "Mr. Schuster, Mrs. Schuster, I'm Eileen."

Mila likes that she talks to Gus. Gus may or may not care, but Mila figures it means that they think about things.

Eileen takes them back past the cubicles to a real room with a table in it. There are shelves on the wall.

"Mrs. Schuster," she says, "I'd like you to sit in with us this first time." Mila has not even thought about not sitting in, but now, suddenly she longs to be allowed to leave. She could go for a walk. Go take a nap. But Gus will probably get upset if she leaves him with a stranger.

And nearly everyone is a stranger.

Gus sits down at the table, bemused.

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Eileen takes a puzzle with big wooden pieces off of a shelf and says, "Mr. Schuster? Do you like to do puzzles?"

Gus says, "No."

Did Gus like to do puzzles? Isn't engineering a kind of puzzle? Mila can't remember Gus ever doing regular puzzles — but they were so busy. Their life wasn't exactly conducive to sitting down and doing puzzles. Gus built telescopes for a while. And then he built model rockets. He made such beautiful rockets. He would sit in front of the television and sand the rocket fins to get the perfect airfoil shape, sawdust falling into a towel on his lap, and then he would glue them to the rocket body using a slow setting epoxy, and finally, when they were about set, he'd dip his finger in rubbing alcohol and run it down the seam to make the fillet smooth and perfect. He made beautiful rockets and then shot them off, risking everything.

"Let's try a puzzle," Eileen says.

"Mila?" It is Gus on the phone.

"I'll get back to you," Mila tells Roger. Roger is the manufacturing engineer on the project she's working on.

"Look," Roger says, "I just need a signature and I'll get out of your hair — "

"It's *Gus*," Mila says.

"Mila, honey," Roger says, "I'm sorry, but I've got four thousand parts in IQA." He wants her to sign off on allowing the parts to be used, even though they're not quite to spec, and she's pretty sure he's right that they can use them. But her job is to be sure.

"Mila," Gus says in her ear, "I think I've got bees in my head."

Roger knew Gus. And Roger is a short-sighted bastard who doesn't care about anything but four thousand pieces of ABS plastic pieces. Actually Roger is just doing his job. Roger is thorough.

"I promise it's okay," Roger says. "I assembled twenty of them, they worked fine."

Mila signs.

"Mila?" Gus says. "Can you hear me? I think I've got bees in my head."

"What do you mean, honey," she says.

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"It itches in my head."

Gus isn't supposed to feel anything from the procedures. There aren't nerve endings in the brain, he can't be feeling anything. It's been four months since the second procedure.

"It itches in your head," Mila says.

"That's right," Gus says. "Can you come pick me up? I'm ready to go home now."

Gus is at home, of course, with Iris, the home health. But if Mila says that he's at home, Gus will get upset. "I'll be there in a while to pick you up. Let me talk to Iris."

"My head itches," Gus says. "Inside."

"Okay, honey," Mila says. "Let me talk to Iris."

Gus doesn't want to give the phone to Iris. He wants...something. He wants Mila to take care of this head itching thing, or whatever it is that's going on. Mila doesn't know what Gus knows about the procedure. Maybe he's sort of pieced this together to get her to come and take him home. Maybe something strange is going on. It is an experimental procedure. Maybe this is just more weird Alzheimer's behavior. Maybe he has a headache and this is what he can say.

"It's bees," he says.

Finally he lets her talk to Iris.

"Does he have a temperature? Does anything seem wrong?" she asks Iris.

"No," says Iris. "He's real good today, Mrs. Schuster. I think that brain cells are growing back because he's really good these last couple of days."

"Do I need to come home?" Mila asks.

"No, ma'am. He just insisted on calling you. I don't know where the bees thing comes from, he didn't say that to me."

Maybe the tissue in his head is being rejected. It shouldn't be. The cells are naïve stem cells. They're from his own body. Maybe there was a mistake.

When she gets home he doesn't mention it.

Sitting across from him at the dinner table, she can't decide if he's better or not. Is he handling a fork better?

"Gus?" she says. "Do you want to look at some photographs after dinner?"

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"Okay," he says.

She sits him down on the couch and pulls out a photo album. She just grabs one, but it turns out to be from when Dan was in first grade. "There's Dan," she says. "There's our son."

"Uh-huh," Gus says. His eyes wander across the page. He flips to the next page, not really looking.

So much is gone. If he does get smarter, she'll have to teach him his past again.

There is a picture of Dan sitting on a big pumpkin. There is someone, a stranger, off to one side, and there are rows of pumpkins, clearly for sale. Dan is sitting with his face upturned, smiling the over-big smile he used to make every time his picture was being taken. He looks as if he is about six.

Mila can't remember where they took the picture.

What was Dan that year for Halloween? She used to make his costumes. Was that the year he was the knight? And she made him a shield and it was too heavy to carry, so Gus ended up carrying it? No, because she made the shield in the garage in the house on Talladega Trail, and they didn't move there until Dan was eight. Dan had been disappointed in the shield, although she couldn't remember why. Something about the emblem. She couldn't even remember the emblem, just that the shield was red and white. She had spent hours making it. It had been a disaster, although he had used it for a couple of years afterward, playing sword fight in the front yard.

How much memory did anybody have? And how much of it was even worth keeping?

"Who is that?" Gus asks, pointing.

"That's my mother," Mila says. "Do you remember my mother?"

"Sure," Gus says, which doesn't mean anything. Then he says, "Cards."

"Yeah," Mila says. "My mother played bridge."

"And poker," Gus says. "With Dan."

The magpie mind, she thinks. He can't remember where he lives but he can remember that my mother taught Dan to play poker.

"Who is that?" he asks.

"That's our neighbor on South Bend," Mila says. Thankfully, his

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name is written next to the photo. "Mike. That's Mike. He was a volunteer fireman, remember?"

Gus isn't even looking at the photos. He's looking at the room. "I think I'm ready to go home now," he says.

"Okay," she says. "We'll go home in a few minutes."

That satisfies him until he forgets and asks again.

DAN COMES IN THE DOOR with his suitcase. "It's nice, Mom," he says. "It's really nice. The way you talked I thought you were living in a project."

Mila laughs, so delighted to see him, so grateful. "I didn't say it was that bad."

"It's plain," he says, his voice high to mimic her, "it's just a box, but it's all right."

"Who's there?" Gus calls.

"It's me, Dad. It's Dan." His face tightens with...worry? Nervousness, she decides.

"Dan?" his dad says.

"Hi Dad," he says. "It's me, Dan. Your son." He is searching his father's face for recognition.

It is one of Gus's good days, and Mila has only a moment of fear before Gus says, "Dan. Visiting. Hello." And then in that astonishingly normal way he sometimes does, "How was your flight?"

Dan grins. "Great, Dad, it was great."

Is it the treatment that makes Gus remember? Or is it just one of those odd moments?

Dan is home for Christmas. It's his Christmas gift for her, he says, to give her a break. It's no break because she's been cleaning and trying to buy presents off the net. Thank God for the net. She's bought Dan cookbooks and cds, a beautiful set of German knives that he's always wanted but would never get because he never cooks at home. She's spent way too much money, but what would she buy Gus? She's bought Gus chocolates for a palate gone childlike. A couple of warm bright shirts. A puzzle.

"I can't believe you're here," she says, and she can feel her face stretched too wide.

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"I'm here," he says. "Of course I'm here. Where else would I be? Lisa says hello."

Lisa is the new girlfriend. "You could have brought her," Mila says.

Gus stands there, vacant and uninterested.

Dan says, "Dad, I've met a really nice girl." She's told Gus about Lisa, but mostly it's to hear her own chatter and because Gus seems soothed by chatter. Whether the magpie left of his mind has noticed the name, she doesn't know.

"I didn't bring her," Dan says. "I thought I would be enough disruption."

Gus doesn't even appear to try to follow the conversation.

"I'll show you your room," Mila says. She's putting Dan in the guest room, which means she'll have to sleep with Gus. This week he has been going to sleep at ten or even earlier. And sleeping until early morning, say, five or six. That, she thinks, has to be the treatment.

On Christmas Eve, Dan makes a fabulous feast. On Christmas Eve they used to eat roast beef, and then on Christmas day they'd eat roast beef sandwiches all day, but in the last few years she's made just a normal meal for the two of them. Dan makes a Christmas roast and Yorkshire pudding. There are puréed chestnuts and roasted potatoes and a salad with pomegranate and champagne dressing. "For dessert," he says, "crème brûlée. I borrowed a torch from Corot's." He brandishes a little handheld torch like the ones in the Williams-Sonoma catalogue. "This is going to be the best Christmas ever!" he cackles, which has been his joke for years, an ironic reference to all those Christmas television specials.

Gus does a puzzle. He has been doing them in therapy and the therapist (a different one from the first one, who is now on maternity leave) says that there are definite signs that the cells are grafting, filling in. Gus likes puzzles. She buys the ones for children eight to twelve. Cannonball Adderly is on the cd player. The tightness in her eases a bit. Christmas has never been a time for good things to happen, not in her experience. Too much at stake, she always supposed. All those expectations of the best Christmas ever.

But at this moment she is profoundly grateful.

"Do you need help?" she calls into the kitchen. Dan has told her she isn't allowed in on pain of death.

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"No," Dan calls out.

The smell of beef drippings is overwhelming. She has been living on microwavable dinners and food picked up at the grocery where they have already cooked stuff to take home and eat and Chinese takeout.

"Why'd you get rid of the microwave?" Dan asks from the kitchen.

"It shorted out," Mila says.

Gus doesn't look up from his puzzle. Does he remember that evening at all? That was after his brain was scrubbed out, so it isn't something he would have lost. But did he ever have it? Does he know what he is living through, moment to moment, or is it like sand?

"Are you in there?" she whispers.

At six o'clock, there is more food than three people could ever eat in a month. Dan has sliced the beef and put beautifully finished slices on their plates. (Gus's is cut up, she notices, and her eyes fill with gratitude.) The beef is cooked beautifully, and sits in a brown sauce with a swirl of horseradish. There is a flower cut out of carrot sitting on bay leaves on her plate and on Dan's — Gus's has the flower, but no bay leaf to mistake for food. The salad glistens and the pomegranate berries are like garnets. There is wine in her glass and in Dan's — Gus's glass has juice.

"Oh, my," she breathes. It's a dinner for grown-ups in a place that has never seen anything but frozen lasagna and Chinese takeout. "Oh, Dan," she says. "It's so beautiful."

"It had better be," Dan says. "It's what I do for a living."

"Gus," she says. "Come eat Dan's dinner."

"I'm not hungry," Gus says.

"Come and sit with me while I eat, then."

Sometimes he comes and sometimes he doesn't. Tonight he comes and she guides him to his seat.

"It's Christmas Eve, Dad," Dan says. "It's roast beef for Christmas Eve dinner." She wants to tell him not to try so hard, to just let Gus make his own way, but he has worked so hard. Please, no trouble, she thinks.

"Roast beef?" Gus says. He takes his fork and takes a bite. "It's good," he says. She and Dan smile at each other.

Mila takes a bite. "Where did you get this meat?" she asks.

"Reider's Stop and Shop," Dan says.

"No you didn't," she says.

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"Sure I did," Dan says. "You've just cooked so many years you don't remember how it tastes when you've just been smelling. I got all my cooking talents from you, Mom."

Not true. He is his father over again, with the same deep thoughtfulness, the same meticulousness. It is always a puzzle, cooking. She cooked as a hobby. Dan cooks with the same deep obsessiveness that Gus brought to model rockets.

"I don't like that," Gus says.

"What?" Dan says.

"That." Gus points to the swirl of horseradish. "It's nasty."

"Horseradish?" Dan says. "You always liked horseradish."

Gus had made a fetish of horseradish. And wasabi and chilies and ginger. He liked licorice and kimchee and stilton cheese and everything else that tasted strongly.

"It's nasty," Gus says.

"I'll get you some without," Mila says, before Dan fights. Never contradict, she thinks at Dan. It's not important. "He's not used to strong tastes anymore," she says quickly to Dan, hoping Gus won't pay attention, that she won't have to explain.

"I'll get it," Dan says. "You sit."

Dan brings a plate. "What have you been eating, Dad?" he asks. "Cottage cheese? Mom, shouldn't he be getting tastes to, I don't know, stimulate him?"

Gus frowns.

"Don't," she says. It's hard enough without Dan making accusations.

Gus has retreated from all but the bland. He eats like a three-year-old might. Macaroni and cheese. Grilled cheese sandwiches. Tomato soup. Ice cream. And she's let him because it was easy. She thinks about telling him that Gus has hit her. That they have been getting through the days.

Maybe inviting Dan was a mistake. Gus needs routine, not disruption.

"How's that, Dad?" Dan says.

"Good," Gus says. Gus eats the roast beef without horseradish, the potatoes, the chestnut purée. He cleans out the ramekin of crème brûlée with his index finger while Dan sits, smiling and bemused.

And then, full, he goes upstairs and goes to bed in his clothes. After

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an hour she goes up and takes off his shoes and covers him up. He sleeps, childlike and serene, until almost seven on Christmas morning.

"I'm getting better," Gus announces after therapy one day in February.

"Yes," Mila says, "you are." He goes to therapy three times a week now, and does the kind of things they do with children who have sensory integration problems. Lots of touching and moving. Evenings after therapy he goes to bed early, worn out.

"I remember better," he says.

He does, too. He remembers, for instance, that the townhouse is where they live. He doesn't ask to go home, although he will say that he wishes they still lived in the other house. She thinks there is some small bit of recrimination in this announcement.

"Do you want to go out to eat?" she asks one evening. They haven't gone out to eat in, oh, years. She is out of the habit.

She decides on Applebee's, where the food is reassuringly bland. These days, Gus might be someone who had a stroke. He no longer looks vacant. There is someone there, although sometimes she feels as if the person there is a stranger.

After dinner at Applebee's she takes him to rent a DVD. He wanders among the racks of DVDs and stops in the area of the store where they still have video tapes. "We used to watch these," he says.

"We did," she says. "With Dan."

"Dan is my son," he says. Testing. Although as far as she can tell he's never forgotten who Dan is.

"Dan is your son," she agrees.

"But he's grown," Gus says.

"Yes," she says.

"Pick a movie for me," he says.

"How about a movie you used to like?" She picks out *Forbidden Planet*. They had the tape until she moved them to the townhouse. She got rid of all of Gus's old tapes when they moved because there wasn't enough room. He had all the *Star Wars* tapes including the lousy ones. He had all the *Star Trek* movies, and *2001*, *Blade Runner*, *Back to the Future I* and *III*.

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"This is one of your favorites," she says. "You made a model of the rocket."

When Dan was a kid he loved to hear about when he was a baby, and Gus is that way now about what he was like "before." He turns the DVD over and over in his hands.

At home he puts it in the player and sits in front of the screen. After a few minutes he frowns. "It's old," he says.

"It's in black and white," she says.

"It's dumb," he says. "I didn't like this."

She almost says, *It was your favorite.* They watched it when they were dating, sitting on the couch together. He had shown her all his science fiction movies. They'd watched *Them* on television. But she doesn't, doesn't start a fight. When he gets angry he retreats back into Alzheimer's behavior, restless and pacing and then opaque.

She turns on the TV and runs the channels.

"Wait," he says, "go back."

She goes back until he tells her to stop. It's a police show, one of the kind everyone is watching now. It's shot three camera live and to her it looks like a cross between *Cops* and the old sitcom *Barney Miller*. Part of the time it's sort of funny, like a sitcom, and part of the time it's full of swearing and idiots with too many tattoos and too few teeth.

"I don't like this," she says.

"I do," Gus says. And watches the whole show.

She lets the home health go.

Iris quit to go to another agency, Mila doesn't know why, and then they got William. Luckily by the time they got William it was okay if Gus was alone sometimes because William never got there before eight-thirty and Mila had to leave for work before eight. William was an affable and inept twenty-something, but Gus seemed to like him. Because William was a man instead of a woman?

Gus says, "Thank you for putting up with me," and William smiles.

"I'm so glad you got better, Mr. Schuster," he says. "I never left before because a patient got better."

"You helped a lot," he says.

Gus can stay by himself. There's so much he doesn't know these days,

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among the strange things that he does. But he can follow directions. The latest therapist — they have had four in the ten months Gus has been going, and the latest is a patient young man named Chris — the latest therapist says that Gus has the capacity to be pretty much normal. It's just a matter of re-learning. And he is relearning as if he was actually much younger than he is, because of those new neurons forming connections.

There is some concern about those new neurons. Children form more and more connections until they hit puberty, and then the brain seems to sort through the connections and weed out some and reinforce others, to make the brain efficient in other ways. Nobody knows what will happen with Gus. And of course, the cause of the Alzheimer's still lurks somewhere. Maybe in ten years he'll start to deteriorate again.

"I am so grateful to you," he says to Mila when William is gone. "You have been through so much for me."

"It's okay," she says. "You'd do the same for me." Although she doesn't know what Gus would do. She doesn't know if she likes this new Gus. This big child.

"I would do the same for you," he says.

"Are you sure you wouldn't stick me in some nursing home?" she says. "Only come visit me once a month?" She tries to make her tone broad, broad enough for anyone to see this comment as a joke.

But Gus doesn't. Teasing distresses him. "No," he says now, "I promise, Mila. I would look after you the way you looked after me."

"I know, honey," she says. "I was just joking."

He frowns.

"Come on," she says. "Let's look at your homework."

He is studying for his G.E.D. It's a goal he and the therapist came up with. Mila wanted to say that Gus not only had a degree in engineering, he was certified, but of course that was the old Gus.

He's studying the Civil War, and Mila checks his homework before he goes to his G.E.D. class.

"I think I want to go to college," he says.

"What do you want to study?" she asks. She almost says, 'Engineering?' but the truth is he doesn't like math. Gus was never very good at arithmetic, but he was great at conceptual math — algebra, calculus,

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differential equations. But now he doesn't have enough patience for the drill in fractions and square roots.

"I don't know," he says. "Maybe I want to be a therapist. I think I want to help people."

Help me, she thinks. But then she squashes the thought. He is here, he is getting better. He is not squatting in the hollyhocks. She's not afraid of him anymore. And if she doesn't love him like a husband anymore, well, she still loves him.

"What was that boy's name?" Gus says, squinting down the street.

He means the home health.

For a moment she can't think and her insides twist in fear. It has started happening recently, when she forgets she feels this sudden overwhelming fear. Is it Alzheimer's?

"William," she says. "His name is William."

"He was a nice boy," Gus says.

"Yes," Mila says, her voice and face calm but her heart beating too fast.

Coming Attractions

WOULD IT BE IMPROPER to suggest that we've forgotten what will grace our cover next month? Then let's come clean: as we go to press, it's uncertain which wonderful story will be our April cover's inspiration.

It might be "Leda," a delicious modern reinterpretation of the Greek myth, compliments of M. Rickert.

Or it might be "The Political Officer," a story of intrigue and adventure in deep space, brought to us by new writer Charles Coleman Finlay.

What we *can* promise you is that we'll have a new story next month from Gardner Dozois. In "The Hanging Curve," Mr. Dozois takes us out to the ball game for nine innings of entertainment. Don't miss this one.

We'll also have our regular features, including Robert Killheffer reviewing the best sf of the year, and new tales soon from Richard Bowes, Jerry Oltion, Alex Irvine, and Paul Di Filippo. If you don't subscribe already, use the handy reply card in this issue to make sure you won't miss any of the upcoming issues.

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CURIOSITIES

HABITABLE PLANETS FOR MAN, BY STEPHEN H. DOLE (1970)

THIS remarkably influential volume is the second edition, a more filled-out argument about what makes planets livable. No professional astronomers had paid much attention to this, so it fell to Dole, an engineer at Hughes Labs in Santa Monica, to work through the myriad parameters that must be *just so* to make a world as fine as ours.

The book's climactic chapter is "An Appreciation of the Earth," and indeed, that is the book's effect. The first edition provoked a popularization by Isaac Asimov, but the second made speculative planetology respectable. Soon enough, the battle over whether we and Earth are very special and rare, or so-what common, raged in *The Astrophysical Journal,* but not in the pages of *Analog.*

Dole had unified many threads that ran through science fiction, dressing them up for polite scientific company. His fate was to be largely forgotten. I had him down to my campus to give a colloquium in 1973 and he was grateful; he had never been asked to speak at a university. He died in 2000 a few miles from U. C. Irvine, proud to have authored a book that sold a few thousand copies in a decade. That same year, the latest entry in the debate, *Rare Earth,* sold more than 50,000 copies in six months. Dole's slim, lonely volume is still more fun to read, and more precise.

—Gregory Benford

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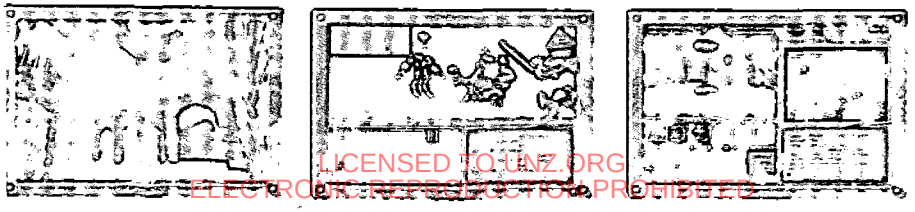

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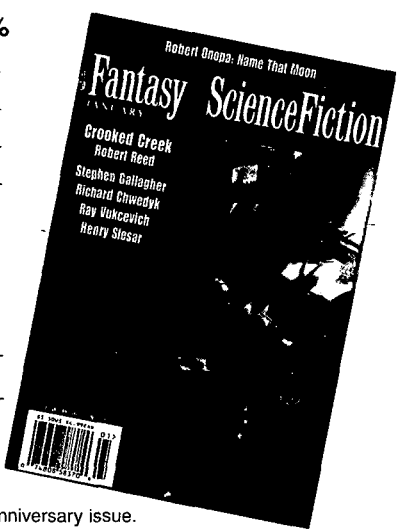

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